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ALL-STORY



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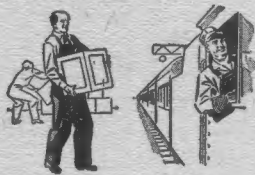
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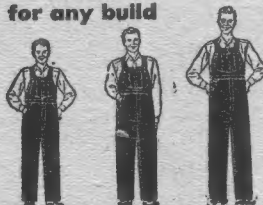
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ALL-STORY WESTERN



VOL. 2

MARCH, 1950

No. 3



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THE GUNSMOKE WAY Bennett Foster 10

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KAYCEE—OR HELL! William E. Barrett 76

"We got a boothill here for quick-iron men, stranger—dug by them that's quicker!"

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SHORT STORIES

DEAD WRONG Jim Kjelgaard 56

Out past the rim of hell, where the trail wolves ride, a man is either a dead shot—or just plain dead!

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A BULLET IS MY HERITAGE George Michener 64

Dan Galt had to fight two men to make his place on Satan's own range—the kid he once had been—and the friend he'd sworn to side to the grave!

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THEY RIDE BY NIGHT Philip Ketchum 116

"All the bullets that never stopped your old man—son, we've saved them up for you!"

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Next Issue Out, March 31st!

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Published bi-monthly by New Publications, Inc., an affiliate of Popular Publications, Inc., at 1125 E. Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Indiana. Editorial and Executive Offices, 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. Henry Steeger, President and Secretary, Harold S. Goldsmith, Vice-President and Treasurer. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Kokomo, Indiana, Copyright, 1950, by New Publications, Inc. This issue is published simultaneously in the Dominion of Canada. Copyright under International Copyright Convention and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. All rights reserved, including the right of reproduction, in whole or in part, in any form. Single copy, 25¢. Annual subscription price for U.S.A., its possessions and Canada, \$1.50; other countries 38¢ additional. All correspondence relating to this publication should be addressed to 1125 E. Vaile Ave., Kokomo, Indiana, or 205 E. 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y. When submitting manuscripts, enclose self-addressed envelope for their return if found unfavorable. The publishers will exercise care in the handling of unsolicited manuscripts, but assume no responsibility for their return. Printed in U.S.A.

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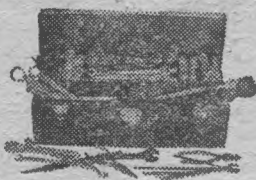
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THE MARCH ROUNDUP

R EIN up a spell, gents, and join in on our regular session of story swapping in these columns. You've made this your claim. When we hit this letter vein some time ago, we had no idea that paydirt was going to come in so steadily, but thanks to you it has. Out of the land about which so much fiction has been written you've been sending us the truth, and your true stories are in many ways stranger than the legends that are told. They help a man to understand just why the days of the Old West make up one of the richest periods in our national history.

The Western frontier moved with the expansion of our country from coast to coast. First it was the Alleghenies, then the Mississippi, then the Rockies. Since it appears that the frontier was kind of flexible, moving as it did with the trail-breakers, we haven't hesitated to stretch it back a little for our first letter to the wild and wooly cowtown of the 'sixties—Philadelphia. Don't go for your irons, now. It

(Continued on page 8)

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(Continued from page 6)

was Philadelphia that gave our country, besides the Declaration Of Independence, one of the most famous marks of a Westerner. We'll let our first correspondent tell you how. The gent from Reno has the floor:

Dear Editor:

The West gave John B. Stetson his health—and John B. gave the West its hat. Like the proverbial prophet honorless in his own country the Stetson, brainchild of a Pennsylvania Easterner, never covered a brain save out yonder.

Seriously ill with tuberculosis, John B. Stetson left his Philadelphia hat shop to go to Colorado for his health in the eighteen-sixties. The mountain air led him to concoct a hat, made out of rabbit skins, that would protect him from the elements on camping trips—and thus was born the first Stetson. Nobody in the mining camps paid much attention, except to laugh at the peculiar headgear, until a cattleman ran across John B. wearing it—and promptly bought it for five dollars.

Having recovered his health, Stetson went back to Philadelphia, duplicated his hat in felt, called it "The Boss of the Plains," and sent it out West. It caught on so fast that within a year he was making nothing else.

And soon the cowboy was wearing nothing else. The wide-brimmed hat came in handy as protection from sun or rain—or for catching a brief squall for drinking water; for firefighting; for blinding a bronc; for hazing steers, or for fire-fanning.

Or, best of all, for catching bullets. A Stetson with a bullet hole in it was the most valuable of all.

Frank Cross
Reno, Nevada

There's many a badman who got shot at and kept it under his Stetson.

Talking about badmen, sometimes the question arises, "How bad can you get?" Here's the story of a team of brothers who tried to find out:

Dear Editor:

They say everyone, no matter how bad he is, has some good in him. I thought *Round-up* readers would be interested in the two Harpe brothers. Maybe they're the exception that proves the rule:

While later history had credited most frontier badmen with at least a faint streak of decency, the story of the two Harpe brothers, Micajah and Wiley, presents a

picture of unrelieved black. The crime which led to their eventual undoing was almost unparalleled for sheer brutality, even in their bloody times.

Fleeing a posse, the brothers had carved a bloody trail of corpses through a good part of the country, when they came to a lone farm house and asked for food. According to the unquestioning hospitality of the frontier, they were being served, when a baby began to cry. Assuring the hospitable farm wife that he had a way with babies, Micajah Harpe left the table, went out to the baby's crib—and returned, smiling, saying he had the child quieted.

He did. When the brothers had left and the mother went to look at the infant, she found its throat had been cut!

This atrocity roused the countryside and the Harpes were caught in short order. During the ensuing fight, Wiley got away, but Micajah was overcome and met summary justice at the hands of the baby's father, a member of the posse, who slashed Micajah's throat before the other possmen could interfere.

Wiley later attempted to "collect bounty" on the head of a fellow bandit, whom he had murdered, but was recognized and lynched.

Joseph Sebastian
Kansas City, Kansas

Compared to those two *hombres*, the James boys could have been Sunday-School teachers! Now let's hear about the ladies, bless 'em:

Dear Editor:

Most historians of the California gold-stage holdup days have overlooked the part played by the high-caliber gals of the time. Contemporary chivalry did much to bury these pistol-packing babes in anonymity. There was the case of the skirted bandit of Arizona, whom a jury refused to convict, out of sheer gallantry, though she drew a light sentence for brandishing a pistol. Another, Dutch Kate, is remembered chiefly for overlooking, during a holdup, a fortune concealed upon the passengers, while looting the stage's gold box of virtually nickels!

Lew Varney,
Phoenix, Arizona

That brings our drive for this issue to an end, friends. Stay with us, though, for more of the classic stories of the Old West, and keep those true yarns coming in. We'll be glad to add 'em to our *remuda*. Until we meet again, *Adios!*

THE EDITORS.

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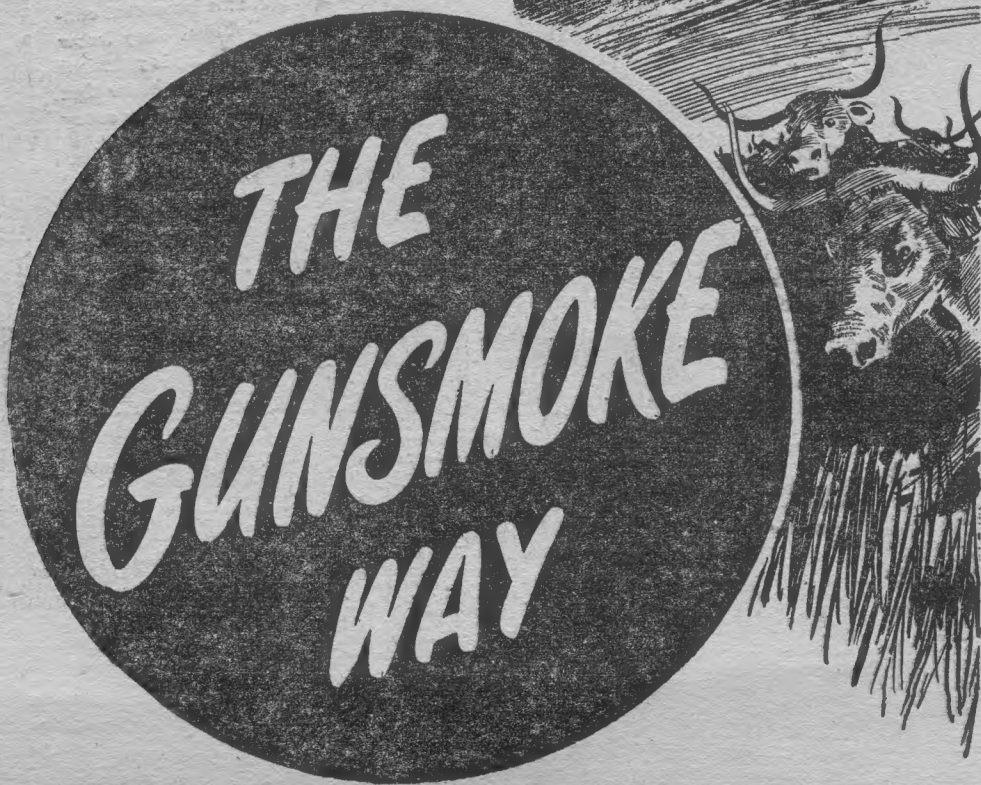
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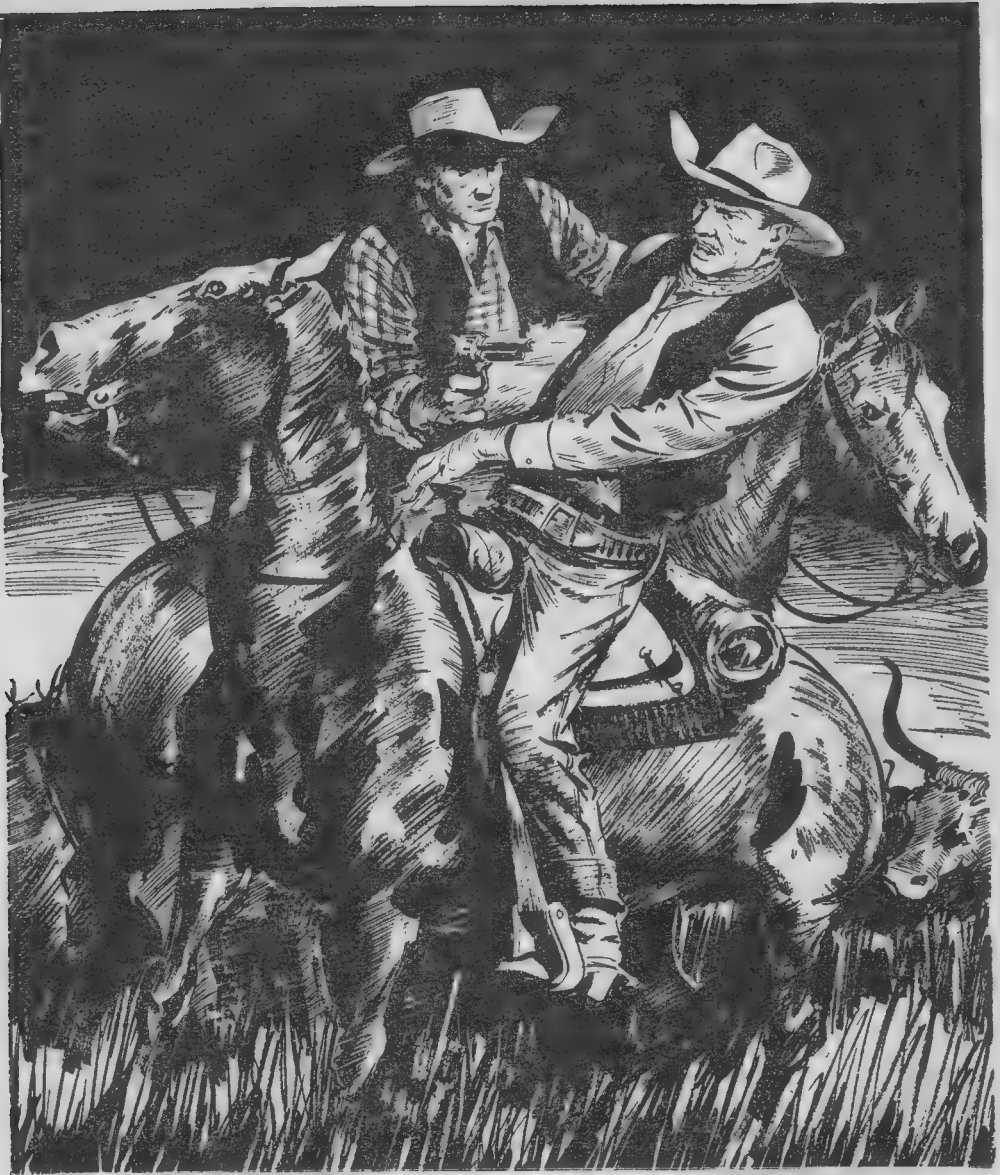
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trail with a dead man's slogan
on his lips: "My gun's for
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buy one, gents — with your
name on it!"



THE GUNSMOKE WAY

A NOVEL BY BENNETT FOSTER



Andrews felt the gun in his side. . . .

CHAPTER ONE

Stampede

THE third guard had gone out to the herd, and the men that had relieved, having taken coffee from the pot on the fire, were now stretched out beneath tarp-covered blankets. One of the off-duty guards was snoring and the

other was lying, face pillowed on his arm, dead to the world.

"Wheat" Andrews, wagon boss for Old Man Metcalf of the Pinetree, sat on the edge of his tarp and pulled on his boots. This was his third trip up the trail, his first as wagon boss. So far he had got by, but he had been lucky. Lucky and unlucky.

The fifteen hundred head of steers he convoyed were as jumpy a bunch as he had ever seen. They spooked at anything and at everything. Twice they had run in the daytime, once when a small dog had come charging and yapping down on the flank of the herd and once when a bronc had come undone and pitched off his rider.

Three times they had run at night. What had caused those night runs Wheat couldn't say. However, he had his suspicions. One night run had occurred when Bert Guthrie, the strawboss, was on guard, and the other two when Bill Walters had been on watch. Guthrie was jealous of him, Andrews knew that, and Bill Walters was mighty thick with Guthrie. Stamping on his boots, Wheat Andrews walked over to the bedwagon, where his horse stood, tied to a wheel. He would just take a little *pasear* out to the herd and see how they were doing out there. The bunch of steers would run if a rider lit a cigarette within sight, or if a careless man popped a quirt against his chaps, or undid a slicker to put it on during a sudden gust of rain. Real spooky they were.

As he walked to his horse, Andrews passed a long, tarp-wrapped bundle on the ground. He grinned down at the sleeper. That was Reb Conyear, and he was part of Wheat Andrews' good luck. True, the herd had run, but so far they had generally run in the right direction and Wheat hadn't lost a steer. He had started with fifteen hundred big steers and eleven men, and he still had them all. Reb Conyear had been largely responsible for that. Wheat liked the rusty-haired boy who lay so quietly in his soggans. Reb Conyear liked Wheat too, the foreman could tell.

He still had a mental picture of Reb Conyear back in the little trail town of Canteau. Reb Conyear standing, a derisive grin on his square, homely face

and the little gold flecks dancing in his hazel eyes while he took it out of Guthrie. Guthrie had been shooting off his mouth in a barroom, talking about his wagon boss, and Reb had called his hand. Reb didn't even know that Wheat had heard that byplay.

There was another memory in Wheat's mind, too. Another picture of Reb sitting his horse on a sandbar while the herd crossed the Canadian. A tough crossing, that had been. Wheat breathed easier now that it was over.

Wheat Andrews tightened the cinch of his saddle, untied his night horse and, sticking a toe in the stirrup, mounted and rode softly away from the sleeping camp. From under the chuckwagon the snores of old Doughgood Thoms, the cook, followed him.

Riding away, Wheat awakened no one. Men trailing cattle will wake when their relief comes to camp at night. Sometimes other things will wake them, but generally they are too worn out with the day's work to bother about anything but sleep.

The herd was a mile from the camp, bedded against a mesa. A little creek ran down from the mesa and a canyon followed up to the rim. Pretty country, but rough, Wheat Andrews thought as he rode. A bad place for a run. He hoped that the steers were tied enough to stay on the bedground tonight.

As he approached the black loom of the sleeping cattle, he began to sing, his voice unmelodious and rough. Over across the herd the voice of Chuck Blossom, smooth and tenor, was softly lilting *The Red River Valley*.

Where was Bill Walters? Wheat strained his eyes to catch sight of the other guard.

The cattle were close now. Wheat was as near as a man riding guard would get. He looked to right and left. His song had almost died on his lips. Beside him loomed a man on horseback. Wheat

could see him. The rider had something lifted in his hand.

"Bill?" asked Wheat Andrews softly.

The lifted hand came down. A quirt popped against a chaps' leg, and with that noise the cattle were on their feet. The quirt popped again. Bill Walters said, "Curse you, Andrews! Sneakin'—"

His horse was beside Wheat's horse. Something hard was thrust into Wheat's side. The cattle were running, running full out, and Chuck Blossom's yell was lost in the popping of their hoofs. Fire from that hard object burned Wheat Andrews' side. He slumped forward. He didn't hear Bill Walters say, "Blast it! I've got to take him with me!"

He didn't hear anything any more. . . .

TWO weeks later, Hi Metcalf sat in the lobby of the Alps Hotel in Denver and scrutinized Reb Conyear with hard, unwinking blue eyes.

"You said you wanted to see me?" questioned Reb, sinking down into a big leather-covered chair beside Metcalf.

Metcalf stroked his little beard. That beard and the weathered-oak face of the man that wore it were known from San Angelo north, all along the trail. "Yo're Reb Conyear, ain't you?" said Hi Metcalf.

Reb nodded.

"Then I sent you word I wanted to see you," said Metcalf. "I been hearin' about you. Likely if I'd heard about you before you started north, I wouldn't've hired you."

Reb lolled lazily in his chair. He was used to talking to these big men, Reb was. He had worked for a lot of them, and while they had power, money, and men to back them, Reb Conyear was never nervous in their presence. For Reb Conyear had power too. Not the power of men and money, but the power to look a man in the eyes, to face a man through powder-smoke if necessary, and to see a thing through.

All his life Reb Conyear had worked for wages. He was a tophand, none better, but it went beyond that, for Reb Conyear had been born in the Tonto basin, had lost his father and his mother in one of the Tonto's little wars, and from the time he was ten Reb had either been hunted or a hunter. Something of his success, something of his reputation, was felt in Metcalf's next speech.

"So yo're Reb Conyear," drawled Metcalf. "You worked for the Stock Association in Arizona, didn't you?"

Reb nodded.

"An' yo're the fella that cleaned up Prescott when it needed it," pursued Metcalf.

"I was in Prescott."

Metcalf leaned forward. "What happened to my cattle?" he demanded.

Reb felt for papers and tobacco. "They run," he said, drawing out his makings. "They'd been runnin' an' they run again, just after we'd crossed the Canadian. We gathered 'em, an' when we tallied there was four hundred head missin' an' your wagon boss was gone."

"I know that," snapped Metcalf. "How'd it happen?"

"Well—" Reb lit his smoke—"we'd bedded against a mesa that had two canyons splittin' it. That was after we'd crossed the river. That night, come third guard, the herd run. We got up an' one of the guards come in an' said they'd gone east. We rode that way. In the mornin' we bunched cattle an' combed the country. We got most of 'em, but Wheat Andrews was missin'. We went back an' combed out the country above the other canyon. There was *malpais* there you couldn't've tracked a elephant over. It run in a horseshoe an' bent down to where the Canadian took a bend. We didn't find the steers that we'd missed an' we worked two days tryin'. Andrews didn't show up an' Guthrie said that Andrews had gone with the steers an' that we had a

delivery date, so he brought us along. When we got here, Guthrie paid me off. We'd had words before that." Reb puffed his smoke.

Metcalf's eyes were keen. "You think Andrews got away with the steers?" he asked.

Reb looked at the end of his cigarette. "He was a right good cowman, but not that good," he drawled. "If those steers were run over *malpais* it would've taken plenty riders to hold 'em on the rocks. Then where'd they go when they come off the *malpais*? No. I think Andrews was with the cattle when they run, or right afterward, but I don't think he's with 'em now."

"What would you do if you was me?" Metcalf drawled the words, his blue eyes half hidden by drooping lids.

Reb shrugged. "I dunno," he answered.

"What were you figgerin' to do?" Metcalf pushed his questioning.

Again Reb shrugged. "Why," he said, carefully choosing his words, "I like Andrews pretty good. I thought mebbe I'd drop back into that country an' sort of look him up."

Blue eyes met hazel. Gold flecks were dancing in the hazel eyes, but Reb's face was impassive. "Hundred a month an' yore outfit," grunted Hi Metcalf. "Give you two dollars a head for every steer you get back. Suit you?"

"What about Andrews?" the hazel eyes were keen.

"Why—" Hi Metcalf looked at the ceiling— "I've sort of raised Wheat Andrews. Man an' boy I've known him for twenty years. I like him. I'd take it kindly if you'd look him up."

"Suppose I find him with the steers?"

Metcalf considered that. "If he wanted them steers worse than he wanted my friendship, he's welcome to 'em," he said.

"An' suppose I find him dead?" Reb spoke the words flatly.

"Then," drawled Metcalf, "I suppose you'd act accordin'. You liked him, you say? You can consider yorese'f the Pine-tree troubleshooter an' I'll back you up."

Reb got up from his chair. "I'm on my way," he said briefly. "I'd like some expense money."

"I'll leave you a letter an' some money at the desk," said Metcalf. "Two months' salary. If you can't do it in two months you ain't goin' to do it, an' you needn't report back. Suit you?"

"Suits me," agreed Reb softly.

Metcalf's old, blue-veined, brown-spotted hand met Reb's young, firm, tanned one and gripped. "Good luck," said Hi Metcalf.

"I'll need it," answered Reb Conyear.

WHEN he left Metcalf, Reb Conyear had a definite plan in mind.

There was a big general store a short distance down the street from the Alps Hotel, and Reb went there to make several purchases. He had ridden a portion of the country in which the Pine-tree steers and wagon boss had disappeared, and had stopped at one ranch back of the *malpais* horseshoe. Now, in the big store, he bought bib overalls, brogans, a straw hat, and red bandana neckerchiefs. He bought some other things and came out of the store carrying an armload. He had hardly been gone ten minutes before another man entered, caught the same clerk that had waited on Reb, and practically duplicated the purchases.

"You're the second man that has been buyin' this stuff today," said the clerk to his customer. "I can't figure out why you cowmen are going in for granger rigging."

"You wrap that stuff up an' tell me what the bill is," said the customer. "Mebbe the cowpunchers have got some sense an' decided to farm."

The clerk wrapped up the parcel and

tendered the bill feeling thoroughly squelched.

Back in the Alps Hotel Reb Conyear put his new wardrobe into a canvas sack. Leaving his room, he went to the desk, where he received an envelope and paid his bill. Then he departed.

At the livery stable where he had left his saddle, Reb made inquiries. He did not need to worry about horses. He had been riding Metcalf horses on the trail north, and old Hi Metcalf had disposed of the whole mount. The livery stable man said that there were freight outfits pulling out almost daily for the south, and told Reb where he might find a reliable freighter. Leaving the livery, Reb encountered Chuck Blossom. Chuck had been celebrating his arrival in Denver, and his payday, and he wanted company.

"Hey, Reb!" he called. "Come on an' have a drink."

Reb didn't have time for a drink, but he liked Chuck. "Sure," he answered. The two crossed the street, entered a saloon and, going up to the bar, ordered beer. While they were waiting for the bartender to draw their beer, Reb heard voices in a booth behind him. Turning, he saw Bill Walters and Arch Guthrie drinking together. Guthrie looked up and, catching Reb's eye, said something to Walters. Walters turned to look and then, getting up from his seat, came out of the booth.

"Hello, Conyear," he said. "Celebratin'?"

"Some," Reb said briefly.

"Say—" Walters was loudmouthed with the liquor he had drunk—"you shot off yore mouth down in Canteau about what a heller Wheat Andrews was. Whaddaya think of him now, the son? Runnin' off his boss's cattle."

"I think just the same of him now that I did then," answered Reb, turning to take his glass of beer. "He was a good man with a rotten crew."

"The hell you say!" Walters blustered. "I was on that crew, yuh know."

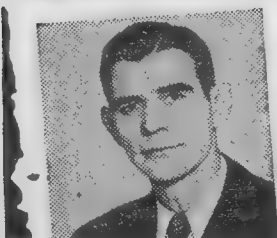
Reb's hazel eyes surveyed Walters bleakly. "An' I still say it was rotten," he observed, and took a gulp of his beer. Walters' face flushed and Chuck Blossom laughed tauntingly.

"Come on back an' sit down, Bill," called Guthrie nervously.

"This feller's talkin' awful loud," blustered Walters, ignoring Guthrie's demand. "I'm goin' to take some of the rough off of him. So you think the crew was rotten just because I was on it, do you?"

"You an' some others." Reb set his glass back on the bar. He watched Walters narrowly. It was against the law to go armed in Denver, but that law was not always rigidly enforced. There was a telltale bulge in the waistband of Walters' levis.

MAN FROM MISSOURI ASKED TO BE SHOWN!



**And He Was!
Carl W. Rau Has
Now Switched to
Calvert Because
it Tastes Better.**

ST. LOUIS, MO.—Carl W. Rau, Missouri chemical engineer, is no longer a skeptic about the big switch to Calvert. "Friends showed me," he said. "Calvert really does taste better, really is smoother any way you drink it."

Walters drew back slightly. Some of his intoxication must have been assumed, because his voice was now sober, coldly insulting. "Cowthief always cottons to cowthief," he said deliberately. "That must be why you stick up for Andrews. You—"

The bartender had gone down behind the bar. Blossom was moving in swiftly, and the barman was coming up again, bringing with him his pacifier, a ten-gauge double-barreled gun; but both moved too slowly.

Walters had reached for the gun in his waistband as he spoke, but Reb Conyear, perfectly balanced and with the experience of a hundred such encounters, leaned in and whipped a short, left-handed blow to the third button on Walters' shirt.

That third button was just over the solar plexus, and Walters, his breath completely gone, lost all control of his arms. When the bartender swiveled the shotgun, Reb Conyear was standing with Walters' gun in his hand. Walters was on the floor and Guthrie was settling back in his seat, his hand falling away from his armpit.

"Pay for the drinks, Chuck," commanded Reb, his voice hard. "Then we'll get out of here. Guthrie, you make another move like that an' I'll take that gun you tote for my collection. Get goin', Chuck."

"You want 'em arrested?" demanded the bartender. "They framed the play. If you want 'em taken in, say the word an' I'll get a deputy."

Reb shook his head. "They're just playful," he answered. "Keep 'em here until I leave, so somebody won't get killed. Walters, I'm goin' to keep yore gun. It ain't safe for you to have one. Mebbe I'll ship it to you an' maybe I won't. Let's go, Chuck."

Chuck was ready. Sobered by the sudden action, he had put his money on the bar and stood watching Reb. The bartender, a man of parts, was staring bale-

fully at Walters and Guthrie, the shotgun very much in evidence.

"Set still," warned the barman. "You tin horns can't get away with nothin' like that in here! When these gents have left, I'm goin' to count ten an' then pull both triggers. Hear me?"

Reb and Chuck Blossom backed out of the door, Reb tucking Walters' gun into his trousers. As the swing doors closed behind the two they heard the bartender say harshly, "One—two—"

Chuck and Reb parted outside the door; Blossom went on toward the railroad station, Reb headed for the warehouse of a freight outfit. He had already made his plan, and now he was ready to carry it out. At the warehouse of Abercrombie and Jones there was much confusion. A string of wagons was pulled up alongside the loading platform and sweating men were loading them. Reb accosted a loafer. The wagons, he was told, were leaving for the south, going down into New Mexico. Here was opportunity. Still carrying his canvas sack, he hurried to the livery stable where his saddle was stored.

There, despite the curiosity of the hostler, Reb stripped in an empty stall and put on the new clothes. What he had taken off went into the sack, and the sack was tied. Reb got a grain sack from the hostler, put his saddle and riding gear into it, and went back to the warehouse.

Dumping his two burdens on the platform, Reb found a clerk. "I want to ship them bundles to Trinchera," he told the clerk. "There's a cowboy paid me to get 'em shipped. Can you take 'em?"

The clerk surveyed Reb. "Got an outfit leavin' today that'll go through Trinchera," said the clerk. "Come on an' we'll weigh 'em up." Reb, lugging saddle and warsack, followed the clerk. "Who's the boss of the wagons?" he asked as he dumped the saddle on the scales. "I'd like to hire on with him for a

roustabout. I got a bedroll an' I can work."

The clerk looked up from juggling weights. "That's him over there," he said, pointing. "Mebbe he can use you."

Reb waited until the saddle and the other bundle were weighed. Then, paying the charges, he walked over to the heavyset, black-bearded man who was watching the loading of the wagons. Blackbeard was short and to the point. He asked questions that Reb answered vaguely. Blackbeard was a judge of men. He noted Reb's smooth, tanned cheeks and his heavy shoulders and the supple movement.

"Well," snapped Black-beard finally, "I don't know what you done or why you want to leave Denver. That ain't my business. I'll hire you. Give you a dollar a day an' yore chuck."

"Suits me," said Reb Conyear.

So, when Abercrombie and Jones' wagons pulled out of Denver late that afternoon, Reb Conyear sat atop a tarp-covered wagon and stared at the broad back of the driver handling the team. He was on his way.

CHAPTER TWO

Trail to Nowhere

IT TOOK the wagon train over a week to reach Trinchera. The little cowtown, perched among the mountains north of the Canadian, was Reb's destination. There Reb proceeded to take several drinks, act as if he had taken many more and, thoroughly cursing the wagon-master, get himself fired. When the wagons pulled out of Trinchera, Reb stood in the street and tried to look woe-begone.

It was a far different Reb Conyear that stood in Trinchera's street from the Reb Conyear who had left Denver. The brogans were battered now and the bib

overalls were caked with dirt. The straw hat he wore denied any acquaintance with the aristocracy of a Stetson, and the blue shirt was dirty and missing buttons. But the greatest change was in Reb's cheeks. A ten-day stubble of rusty beard covered his cheeks. He was dirty. Indeed Reb was dirty from the skin out. He was playing a role and playing it for all it was worth.

For two days after the wagons left, Reb lazed about the little cowtown. He drank a little, listened a lot, and at the end of the two days knew a few things that he needed badly to know. The next morning, rising early, he washed his face and went down to Trinchera's one general store. In its warehouse were a sacked saddle and a warsack waiting for an owner to claim them. Reb wondered if, at the end of his two months, he would walk into the store and get them.

From seven o'clock on he hung around the store. People went in and out in greater numbers than usual, for it was Saturday. About noon, a light rig whirled up to the store and a portly, bearded man got out and reached up to help a girl dismount. Reb waited until the team was tied to the hitchrack before he moved forward. While he waited, he looked at the girl. Black-haired, olive-cheeked, with flashing black eyes and a warm, generous mouth, she stood waiting for the man to finish tying the team. When the man had secured the horses and started toward the waiting girl, Reb stepped forward.

"Mr. McAlpine?" he asked, making his voice a whine.

McAlpine stopped short. "What do you want?"

"I heard you wanted hay hands," mumbled Reb, keeping his eyes down. "I'd like to get a job."

"Ever cut any hay?" asked McAlpine.

"I cut hay an' stacked," answered Reb. "I'm a good hand at a stack."

McAlpine grunted. "Got a bed?"

"Yes, sir."

"I pay a dollar an' a half a day," McAlpine's tones were curt, "an' you got to get along with Granny Block. It's a wagon outfit, you know. We move around an' cut hay on the vegas. If you can stack hay, I'll hire you."

"I can stack hay."

"What do they call you?" demanded McAlpine.

"Rusty," answered Reb Conyear promptly.

"Have yore bed here at four o'clock," ordered McAlpine. "I'll take you to the ranch."

"Yes, sir," Reb ducked his head. "I'll be here."

"If you aren't, there won't be any job," McAlpine told him, and crossed the walk to the waiting girl.

At four o'clock, Reb was at Pry's store waiting. He was still waiting at five o'clock, and it was not until half past five that McAlpine and the buckboard arrived. McAlpine told Reb to put his bedroll in the back of the buckboard and jump on, and Reb obeyed the order. A box of supplies was carried out from Pry's and loaded in, and McAlpine took the lines and drove the team on down the street. At a dwelling set well back from the road McAlpine stopped.

"Go get Charlotte," he said, looking back over his shoulder at Reb. Reb climbed out of the buckboard, and, going up the walk to the house, knocked at the door.

"Is Miss McAlpine here?" he asked the white-haired woman who answered the knock.

"I'll get her," was the reply, and Reb waited. Presently dark-haired Charlotte McAlpine came to the door, her arm around a blonde girl who, shorter than Charlotte, was laughing up at her.

"I'll be expecting you this week, then, Beryl," said Charlotte McAlpine. "You'll let her come, won't you, Mrs. White?"

The white-haired, motherly woman smiled and nodded, and Charlotte, after kissing both of them, bade them good-by and walked past Reb. Apparently she didn't see him at all.

In the buckboard, leaving Trinchera, Reb sat on his bedroll and listened, unabashed, to the conversation in the front seat. It was part of his business to listen to conversations, and he had no qualms or scruples. But he heard nothing. The conversation between Ian McAlpine and his daughter had to do with plans for the visit of Beryl White to the McAlpine ranch and that was all.

The buckboard rolled along at a steady gait. McAlpine had two good horses—bronses such as a ranchman might be expected to drive, but trotters, evidently with some Standard Bred blood in them. They cut off the miles, but the sun was racing them and winning. It was dusk before the road swung south, and a full three hours had elapsed before McAlpine stopped for Reb to open a gate.

When the gate was replaced and Reb was back on his bedroll again, the tired horses walked down a lane—Reb could see the fence posts on either side—went through another gate already down, and stopped. A man came running from a lighted building and took the team's bits.

McAlpine spoke to Reb. "You go down to the old bunkhouse, Rusty," he directed. "You'll find a lamp down there. Take any of the bunks, an' then see if the cook will feed you. I haven't got my hay crew in yet. Just one man, so you won't be crowded." With that he lifted the box of groceries from the buckboard and walked away after Charlotte, who had already gone to the big house that bulked black some distance from the vehicle.

"Where's the old bunkhouse?" asked Reb of the man who held the team.

"Down back of the house where you see the light, granger," answered the cowboy.

Reb shouldered his bedding and walked toward the light, and the puncher led the team away.

Arriving at the bunkhouse—an old rock structure built behind the newer cabin that served the riders—Reb struck matches, located the lamp, lit it and threw his bed on a bunk. A tousle-headed kid in another bunk rolled over and then sat up when the light struck his eyes. Reb, opening his bed, nodded to the boy.

"Just got in," he said.

The boy lay back in his blankets. "You'll be out at three," he said sleepily. "Better turn in."

Reb grinned and began to undress. No use bothering the cook at this time of night, and if the tousle-haired kid was right, morning was going to come mighty early on Ian McAlpine's Triangle Dot spread. Cupping a hand over the lamp chimney, Reb blew out the light and slid down into his blankets.

The tousle-headed kid had been right. Before dawn there was a yell in the bunkhouse and a raucous voice demanded attention. "Git up, you grangers! Want to sleep all day? Git up!"

REB rolled over in his bed, and, looking at the door, saw in the dim light a short, squat, broad-shouldered man. Reb sat up in his bed, rubbed the sleep from his eyes and looked again. The man who had called was gone, and fresh morning air was streaming through the open door. Reb grinned at the kid in the other bunk, threw back the covers and put his feet on the cold floor.

As they dressed, the two occupants of the bunkhouse introduced themselves. The kid gave his name as Whitey Cosgrove. The man who had called them, Whitey said, was Granny Block, McAlpine's foreman for the granger outfit. Granny was several other things, none of them very pleasant, according to Whitey.

With their clothing on, the two washed,

Reb rather thoroughly, Whitey with a lick and a promise. Then they went to the cookshack.

There were two tables set. One had two places, the other ten. Whitey led the way to the table with two places, and presently the Triangle Dot punchers came in and sat down at the big table.

There is an aristocracy of cowhands. The true cowman, the puncher, cowboy—call him what you will—does only the work that can be done on horseback or that a horse will carry him to. Haying, making fences, building tanks, erecting windmills—these things were done by a granger crew. The ten men who sat at the big table were cowpunchers. That made all the difference.

When the punchers had been served, the cook—a cripple with one leg shorter than the other—brought food to Whitey and Reb. At the big table, the cowmen talked among themselves. At the other table, the two ate in a dead silence broken only by the sound of Whitey sucking up his coffee from a saucer.

Reb listened to the talk at the other table. As usual, it concerned horses, the previous day's work, conditions of range and cattle. The usual ranch conversation. Nothing interesting; nothing out of the way. Still Reb singled out a man or two.

There were a big, bearded one the others called Blackie and a smaller, wrinkled man called Tobe, who drew his attention. The two sat together at the end of the table and didn't say much. Apparently they were partners and apparently, too, they hadn't been with the Triangle Dot very long. The fact came out in the course of the conversation when Tobe asked for information concerning a certain portion of the country.

Two others also drew Reb's attention: Wingate, the foreman, and gray-haired, barrel-chested, runty Granny. Reb knew that he would have plenty to do with Granny. Watching the little man, Reb

could not help but like him. Granny Block's face was rock hard, but there was a twinkle in his eyes that promised a good many things.

When the meal was done the cowboys went out, following Wingate toward the corrals and saddle sheds, and Block came over to Reb and Whitey's table.

"Hayin'," said Granny Block, "won't start 'til we get a crew. Today you'll clean a tank here by the house. Come on!"

Whitey and Reb rose and followed him.

At the corrals, the riders were saddling. Wingate was laying out the work to several who already had their saddles on mounts, and as the men came out with their horses he gave further directions. Singly or in pairs the riders left, and finally Wingate was alone. He nodded to Block and said, "It's all yours, Granny," and stared toward the big house, where smoke was just beginning to come from the chimney.

Granny Block took hold of Reb's arm. "You see them mules?" Reb saw them, all right. There were four of them—big bay animals with long ears and collar-galls on their necks. "You'll find some chain harness in the barn," Granny Block went on. "Hitch them mules to the fresno in the yard an' then go to that tank over there an' scrape out the sand. It's blowed full." Block turned away, then stopped.

"An' don't swear," he admonished. "The tank's right behind the house an' I don't want you shockin' the ladies."

With that he was gone, tramping off around the corral. Whitey looked at Reb. "Them mules are devils," said Whitey.

Reb shrugged. "Let's get the harness," he proposed.

Whitey Cosgrove knew where the harness was kept, and he and Reb brought it to the corral. While they were carrying it out, Block, his blue eyes twinkling, passed them again without a word, and went into the barn.

"Now," grunted Whitey, dumping harness on the fence, "he'll stay in there an' watch us an' laugh, an' when we don't get the job done he'll come out an' raise hob with us. You wait an' see."

Reb's eyes narrowed. "Didn't I see a rope in the saddle room?" he asked.

"Sure, there's one there," answered Whitey. "But what good'll that do us? I can't rope much, an'—"

"You go get it," drawled Reb. "I never caught a mule yet by puttin' salt on his tail."

Puzzled, Whitey went toward the saddle shed and Reb, climbing the bars of the corral, stood in the dust inside and eyed the mules and the horses that had been left. He liked the looks of the Triangle Dot mounts and he liked the looks of those mules.

Whitey came back, carrying the rope, and handed it over the fence. "I still don't see—" he began.

"Come in here an' bring 'em around for me," Reb commanded, laying out the rope. "I figure to harness them mules."

Whitey climbed the fence and Reb coiled the rope and shook out a loop. "Now bring 'em around," he ordered.

There was a snubbing-post in the center of the round corral. Reb, rope in hand, walked toward it. Whitey started the mules and the few horses around the corral. As the first mule, a big bay, passed Reb, the roper turned his back, his hand flipped out and the open loop stood on its edge like a barrel hoop. The running mule put both front feet through the loop and Reb, snapping his rope up, snubbed short on the post. The mule hit the end of the rope, went over and thumped on the ground. Whitey knew enough to run and sit on the struggling animal's head, and Reb, coming up the rope, caught a hind foot in a half hitch, caught the other hind foot and pulled tight. Two more wraps of the rope and he straightened.

"Just sit there," directed Reb Conyear.

"It ain't hard to harness a mule on the ground."

In the barn, Granny Block rubbed his eyes and then peered again through the crack he was using. Reb was dumping chain harness down upon a supine mule.

Three times the procedure was repeated, and each time a harnessed mule was added to those tied to the fence outside the corral. Then, with Reb handling the lines, the mules moved docilely off toward the fresno. Granny Block, carefully slipping out of the rear door of the barn, watched the four mules pull the fresno toward the dry tank he had indicated. Then, disbelief still in his eyes, the little boss of the granger wagon went hurriedly toward the house.

"Farmer!" he said as he walked. "Farmer, is he? Like hell!"

CHAPTER THREE

Lone Rider

IAN McALPINE was just getting up from the table when Block came in. He walked over to the door, nodded to the old man and preceded him to the little room that he used for an office. Inside the office, seating himself, he looked up and spoke.

"What's on your mind, Granny?"

Granny Block sat on the edge of the table that McAlpine used for a desk, and

swung a short, booted leg. "That fellow you hired to hay," he said, "the one you call Rusty. He ain't no more a granger than I am."

"No?" drawled McAlpine.

"No. You ought to seen him harness them mules. Forefooted 'em as neat as you please an' laid 'em on the ground. Granger, shucks! He'd make a tophand in any man's outfit."

"So?"

"So, I'm wonderin'," said Granny Block, "if he's another of those range detectives you been hirin'."

McAlpine sat erect in his chair. "Who said that I'd been hirin' range detectives?" he demanded.

Block shrugged. "It's plain as the nose on yore face," he answered familiarly. "That fellow Blackie an' that runt Tobe couldn't be nothin' else. You been losin' cattle, but I'm durned if I thought that you'd lost so many that you'd throw men in here like them."

"Who else thinks they're detectives?" demanded McAlpine harshly.

Block shrugged. "How do I know what the men think?" he countered. "When you goin' to get the rest of the hay crew?"

"They'll be comin' along as Pry hires 'em," answered McAlpine. "I told him to send out some men, an' he said he'd get 'em."

"We got to get to cuttin' pretty soon," said Block. "I hope Pry does send 'em."

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Say, if you want to see somethin' nice, you go out an' watch that Rusty handle that four-up of mules. He's gettin' along right well, an' if he handles 'em many mornin's like he did this 'un, all he'll have to do will be show 'em a rope an' they'll lie down to be harnessed."

Block slipped down from the table and McAlpine stood up. "You keep yore mouth shut, Granny," he warned. "About me hirin' men, I mean. That fellow Tobe is from the Stock Association. I don't know where Blackie came from. I took him on when I put Tobe to work. I thought that if I hired two men at a time, I'd kind of mix things up if somebody was watchin'. Get it?"

Granny Block grinned. "I get it," he said. "I'll keep shut. An' Rusty ain't no detective?"

"Not that I know," answered McAlpine.

Block's grin widened. "Then he's on the dodge," he said. "A heck of an outfit this is gettin' to be. Well, I don't care. I don't want to know what he done. He'll make a hand anyhow."

With that, Granny Block pulled down his hat and left. When he was gone, Ian McAlpine sat back down in his chair and put his feet up on the table. A heck of an outfit, Granny had said. Maybe Granny Block didn't know just how much of a heck of an outfit the Triangle Dot was getting to be.

It took two days for Reb and Whitey to clean the tank and fix up the walls. They did a nice job. Granny Block came around and looked at the work and grunted, but he didn't have any fault to find. That was something. The mules behaved. A repetition of the roping of the first morning made pretty good mules out of them. Reb felt that he was earning his one-fifty a day.

He learned a lot from Whitey. Whitey was a local boy, the son of a nester who was having heavy sledding of it up on

the mesa west of the Triangle Dot headquarters, and he knew a lot about the outfit. This was his second summer working for McAlpine, and he talked freely.

From Whitey, Reb learned something of the country, something of the Triangle Dot. Granny Block had been with McAlpine since the time the chunk was laid. He was old now, and didn't do any active riding, and his place as foreman had gradually been taken by Herb Wingate. Granny resented that change and, so Whitey said, was jealous of Wingate. Whitey aspired to be one of Wingate's riders and, indeed, the tall, taciturn foreman showed Whitey some consideration.

Of the others, Whitey hadn't much to say. Most of the men had been with the Triangle Dot for a year or more. Only Blackie Cook and Tobe Summers were new hands. Harvey Little rode the rough string and was Whitey's hero. The rest he just spoke of and passed over. However, there was one person on the Triangle Dot about whom Whitey spoke at length. That was Charlotte McAlpine. Charlotte had been East to school and she was stuck-up, big-headed, and conceited, according to Whitey. Reb reserved judgment. He liked the girl's looks. Moreover, he noticed that she spent as much time as she could with Harvey Little, who was a square-faced, grinning kid, and it seemed to Reb that a stuck-up girl would have dodged the company of an ordinary cowpuncher.

Reb had already learned that Sunday was just another day on the Triangle Dot. The work went right on, rain or shine, Sunday or Monday. McAlpine worked as hard as his men, and Reb, listening and watching, was not so sure as he had been that his suspicions were correct.

Reb had chosen work with the granger outfit because he knew that he must have some excuse for being in the country, and that he must not attract attention. The role of granger hand fitted those requirements perfectly. The riders would pay no

attention to him as a hay hand, and as the granger wagon moved around, Reb could look over the country. Most important, granger hands are usually drifters and talk a lot. With someone like Whitey, who knew the country, to help in the talking, Reb felt certain that he would hear something that would give him a lead.

Three days after he had arrived at the Triangle Dot, Pry, the merchant of Trinchera, sent ten more men out to the ranch. The day after that, Pry himself arrived with two others, one of whom was a cook. This completed the hay crew, and Granny Block had men to boss.

He had already put Reb and Whitey at work getting mowers and other equipment ready, and now the work stock was brought in and business picked up. Reb, sizing up Pry and the newcomers, thought that he had never seen a harder looking crew. There was not a man that Pry had brought out that did not look as though he would cut a throat for two bits. Pry himself was a long, slender *hombre* with black eyes set close together and a long, thin nose above a little, tight mouth.

Whitey had already told Reb that Pry was the big man of Trinchera, that he had a ranch as well as a store and that he did what banking business was done in the little town. Reb's opinion of the inhabitants of the mesa country was lowered considerably when he heard that. Personally he would not have trusted Pry with a plugged nickel.

With the hay crew complete, the mowers and rakes were loaded on wagons, bedrolls were tossed up, the remuda was turned over to Whitey to wrangle, and Granny Block appeared with a gun strapped to his fat old middle. The drivers took the lines, and with Granny riding a horse as fat as himself, the outfit pulled out for the first meadow.

The first jump was eight miles. At the end of the drive, camp was set up along-

side a hay meadow. That afternoon the crew began to cut hay.

Reb had thought that he was to work on the stacks, but Granny changed that idea for him. Reb got a mower with a team of fractious broncs. More than that, when the *remuda* had been brought into the rope corral, Granny had called Reb over, handed him a saddle rope and ordered him to rope out the horses for the other drivers. Hiding his surprise behind his now considerable beard, Reb had obeyed the order.

BUMPING along on the seat of the mower, Reb cut hay and considered his position. Here he was, right where he had wanted to be. The Canadian was not twelve miles away and the horseshoe mesa with its hard *malpais* rim was not over ten miles distant.

Still, he hadn't made any progress in his quest. Reb thought it over.

Then he stopped his mower and, oilcan in hand, oiled around. If he didn't run in to something pretty soon, he decided, he would quit this job, go get his saddle and gear, hire a couple of horses and ride the country. But that was a last resort. Better stay with this job a while, for it had been McAlpine's Triangle Dot that Reb had visited when looking for the missing Pine-tree steers, and the horseshoe mesa was on Triangle Dot range.

That night at supper, Reb had cause to be pleased with his decision. When dusk was settling and the men were squatted about the fire eating, big Blackie Cook came riding in to tell Granny that he was to stay the night. After supper, Blackie drew aside a squint-eyed, pock-marked man called Tom Dally, and the two talked until long after the others had gone to bed. Reb caught none of the conversation, but he did watch the two, and when they parted Reb would have bet that he was on a trail, some kind of trail at least.

Morning came, and fortune threw favors in Reb's lap. When the nighthawk brought in the *remuda*, there were horses missing. Granny Block swore and raved and ended by calling for Rusty. When Reb arrived, Block gave orders.

"Listen," said Granny, "yo're no farmer. I seen you rope. Now you take a horse an' saddle an' you go find them run-aways. An' don't you come back till you do. Hear me?"

One or two old saddles had been brought out from the ranch for just such contingencies. Reb secured one of these, took the most likely looking horse that he could find, and set out, first securing information from the nighthawk as to where the horses had been held during the night.

It was no particular task to find the horses. They had headed back toward the ranch pasture, and Reb found them against the fence. He drove them along with him, back toward camp, and then an idea struck him. Here he was, loose and with time on his hands. He might as well spend the day out here. Reb turned the horses he was driving and headed for the horseshoe mesa. He had never been thoroughly satisfied with his investigation of that mesa.

Leaving the horses atop the mesa, he rode to the rim and scouted along the *malpais*. He didn't expect to find tracks, didn't expect to find much of anything, but he was reconstructing a happening. Four hundred head of big four-year-old Pinetree steers had disappeared in this *malpais*, and Reb wanted to know how they had done it.

He rode along the edge of the *malpais* until the rim broke off and stretched down to the hardpan of the river bottom. There he stopped his horse and sat looking out over the country. Down there was the Canadian River, just as he had seen it on that other occasion, and down there....

Reb leaned forward in his saddle. Down

there at the bank of the river was a man.

Reb watched him. He saw him skirt along the river, riding aimlessly. He saw him stop and dismount, and then he saw the rider, climbing back on his horse, falter as his leg crossed the cantle of the saddle. The horse whirled and the rider fell, then flat and faint through the distance, the echo of a shot drifted up to Reb Conyear. The rider's horse trotted a few steps and stopped, looking back, and the man lay flat on the ground by the river.

Reb waited. He had not recognized that rider, nor had he seen smoke from the shot. The man lay there, a black mark on the ground. The horse stood a moment with upflung head, then lowered it and moved slowly across the hardpan toward grass, and fell to grazing. High in the sky was a black speck, a buzzard.

Reb moved his horse toward the slope and then down the river came another rider, his horse moving as though on business. Reb watched this new arrival, saw him suddenly straighten in his saddle and the horse break into a lope. Reb saw him slide the horse to a stop and throw himself out of his saddle, and then saw him bend down over the man on the ground.

Then Reb wheeled his mount and rode back.

Reb picked up his strays about where he had left them and started along toward camp. The things he had seen filled his mind with questions. As he sent the horses down over the slope of the mesa he wondered who that rider had been, who the second man was. Had the second man shot the first? Reb thought not. He had acted surprised and he had surely shaken out his horse to get to that prone body. Still, one couldn't be sure. Maybe that was an act. Reb was putting on an act, why not somebody else?

McAlpine was coming up the river. There was a carbine in the saddle scabbard under the fender of McAlpine's saddle. Reb waited.

"Strays?" demanded McAlpine, coming up and halting his horse.

"Yes, sir," said Reb and did not take his hand from the bib of his overalls. "Mr. Block sent me out to gather 'em."

"Where'd you find 'em?" McAlpine was short.

"Over against the mesa," answered Reb.

McAlpine considered the man. "Block says that you're a cowpuncher," he said.

Reb cursed the mules and his roping under his breath. "I ain't a puncher," he whined. "I been around ranches some, but I ain't a puncher."

McAlpine seemed about to say something and then thought better of it. "I'll help you take 'em in," he offered.

"Thanks," said Reb.

The two moved on after the strays. Reb was careful to let himself slump in the saddle, to let his arms move with the trot of his horse. Just a fool granger in bib overalls, Reb Conyear was. Sure. That was all. From the corners of his eyes McAlpine watched his companion, and Reb did not miss that scrutiny.

The crew was cutting hay when Reb and McAlpine got in with the strays. Granny told Reb where the *remuda* was and Reb took the horses on out and turned them over to Whitey, who was day-wrangling. When he came back Granny put him on a stack. The hay was coming in pretty fast and Reb was kept busy.

Tom Dally, also stacking, worked just across from Reb. McAlpine and Granny stood talking together.

Reb, building stack carefully, waited for developments. They were not long in coming. A man on a big black horse pulled into the meadow and behind him, lying across a saddle, was another man. The rider was Herb Wingate, Triangle Dot foreman, and Reb could see from the top of his stack that the prone bundle lying across the saddle of the second horse was Tobe Summers.

Wingate's arrival caused a furore. Men quit work and flocked around. Wingate unroped Summers and laid him on the ground. The man was dead, there was no disputing that.

Wingate stood over Summers and answered McAlpine's questions. McAlpine kept his head. He didn't go off half cocked. He asked Wingate what had happened and Reb, who had come down from his stack, listened to the answers.

Wingate, so he said, had been riding down the river and had seen a man on the ground, and a grazing horse near by. Riding up and dismounting he had found Summers, who, shot through the chest, was dying even as Wingate bent over him. The foreman's face was hard as he talked, but not harder than McAlpine's rocklike countenance. And Reb noticed something as he listened to the talk that checked so exactly with what he had seen. There



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was a rifle lashed on Wingate's saddle.

CHAPTER FOUR

Diamondback

McALPINE issued orders. A hay wagon was unloaded. Tobe Summers' body was loaded on it and taken to the ranch, and from the ranch a message was to go to Trinchera to Scott Davis, the deputy sheriff there. With that attended to, McAlpine singled out Reb.

"Get yoresef a horse, Rusty," he commanded. "You an' Wingate an' me will go back down the river an' look around."

Reb still had his horse in camp. He got the animal and when he rejoined Wingate and McAlpine found them ready to ride. Granny Block was with them, expostulating and trying to go along, but McAlpine was obdurate.

"Somebody's got to stay here and run this outfit," he said. "That's yore job, Granny." Perforce Granny stayed, but before the three left the old foreman came over to Reb. Unbuckling his cartridge belt, he handed it up.

"You take this, Rusty," he said. "She's a hair-trigger, now mind."

Reb was suffering from a plethora of guns. What with his own in his overall bib, he felt like a walking arsenal. But appearances demanded that he take the weapon and so, thanking Block, he strapped it on. With McAlpine and Wingate, he rode back toward the river.

At the river there was nothing to find or to see. Wingate showed McAlpine and Reb the spot where he had found Tobe Summers. There were no tracks on the hardpan, only a dark spot that showed where Summers had bled. Beating along the river bank brought no result.

McAlpine and Wingate crossed the stream, fording the first channel, emerging on the sandbar and splashing across the

second channel. Their search of the opposite bank did not enlighten them, although they covered it carefully. The three spent the remainder of the day along the river, and it was dark when they returned to the hay camp.

They left Reb at the camp and rode on to the ranch, telling Block that they would be back as soon as the deputy came out from Trinchera, probably early the next morning.

Reb, unsaddling his horse, carried his old saddle over to the bedwagon. As he dumped it in beside Granny Block's saddle, he noticed a strange saddle in the wagon. Reb managed to knock the blanket from this unfamiliar hull and, climbing up to replace the blanket, made a hasty examination. The saddle was fairly new, and while there was no scabbard on it there was a rubbed spot on the leather on the underside of the right fender, and the rigging showed where straps had held a scabbard in place.

Coming back from the wagon to the fire, Reb returned Block's gun. Collecting his supper from the dutch ovens and frying pans that were close to the blaze, he repaired to a spot well away from the others and ate his meal.

As he ate, Whitey Cosgrove came over to him. Whitey was full of talk and conjecture. He asked questions and gave his ideas as to what had happened. Reb listened. He had already noted that Blackie Cook was in camp, and now he asked a question of his own.

"Whose cactus is that in the wagon, Whitey?" queried Reb.

"That's Blackie's," answered Whitey. "He come in off the mesa while you was out with McAlpine."

Finishing his supper, Reb dumped his dishes in the dishpan and, rolling a thin smoke, sat down. Whitey came over again and wanted to talk, but Reb had pulled back, deep into his mind.

Reb had seen a man shot that day: He

had seen Herb Wingate along the river and Wingate carried a rifle on his saddle. He had seen Ian McAlpine come out of the river bottom and McAlpine, too, carried a rifle, and he had seen a saddle, Blackie Cook's saddle, that showed where a rifle scabbard had been fastened under the fender. Who was it? McAlpine, Wingate, Cook, or some unknown? How should he know? Reb asked himself crossly. What business was it of his?

He went to bed still asking himself that question.

In the morning the hay crew went to work. They were almost through with the cutting and stacking at that particular spot and—so Reb told himself when he looked at the hay that remained to be cut—they should be through by noon and moving on to another meadow.

Reb was on top of his stack, rounding it off, when a little party came to the hay camp. McAlpine and Wingate and Scott Davis, the deputy sheriff from Trinchera.

Besides those three, there was a buckboard with two men. One of the men Reb recognized as Jake Pry, and he nearly fell off the stack when he got a good look at the other man. There, sitting beside Pry, dressed in bib overalls and a straw hat, with brogans on his feet was Bill Walters, erstwhile rider for the Pinetree.

"What in the—" Had Metcalf sent Walters out on the same mission as Reb? What was Walters doing here?

REB got down from his stack. It was finished anyhow, and there wasn't much more hay to come in. Walking across, he joined Tom Dally on another unfinished stack and fell to work again. McAlpine and the deputy and Wingate were riding out of camp, bound for the scene of the killing, and Pry and Walters were talking to Granny Block.

Granny nodded and Walters walked around the buckboard and pulled off a

bedroll. So Walters was going to be part of the hay crew! A loaded wagon came up, and Reb was busy again.

As Reb had thought, they finished by noon. Reb, joining the rest of the crew at the camp, loaded his plate and ate his dinner. Walters was there. He looked sharply at Reb but apparently didn't recognize him. Reb's beard covered his face



REB CONYEAR

in a rusty stubble, his clothing was dirty and his hat battered.

Reb devoutly hoped that Walters didn't know him. Still, he couldn't be sure. When the meal was finished, Granny Block gave orders and the camp was loaded. Granny led the way, and the string of loaded wagons moved off toward the river.

It took them all afternoon to make the move, and when they arrived at their destination they found Herb Wingate waiting for them. Block hailed Wingate and the foreman answered. McAlpine and Davis, Wingate said, had gone back to the ranch. He gave no accounting for his own presence.

The new meadow was in the river bottom. The horseshoe mesa was two miles distant, and the hardpan flat perhaps three miles. They unloaded and camp was made beside an old stack yard in which there was still a stack or two standing.

The remuda was driven off to graze,

Wingate riding out with Whitey, and the cook made his fire and began the preparation of supper. Reb, his bed unloaded, looked about for a place to put it. He wasn't going to put it close to Walters. he knew that. Dragging the bed, he stopped close beside the stack yard fence. As he unrolled it, Granny Block walked over and stood beside him.

"Where'd you find those horses, Rusty?" he asked curtly.

Reb, unthinking, told the truth. "Against the pasture-fence at the ranch."

Block grunted and walked away, then suddenly Reb recalled that he had told McAlpine that he had found the horses on the mesa. Now, Reb wondered, what would come of that?

When he and McAlpine had brought the horses in, they had come up the river, and that was in the direction just opposite from the Triangle Dot headquarters. Block was no fool. Reb, thinking it over, decided that he had certainly spilled his beans.

But Block did not come back, and nothing was said. Whitey came in alone, having been relieved by the nighthawk, and reported that Wingate had gone on to the ranch.

Going to bed well away from the others, Reb undressed and put his gun under his head. There was another gun in the bed-roll, the gun Reb had taken from Bill Walters in Denver. Its presence did not make Reb feel any better. If Bill Walters wanted a gun, he could get one, Reb was certain. As far as Walters was concerned, that .41 Frontier Colt was not the only gun in the world. They sold guns in Denver and in a good many other places. Reb lay down in his bed and let the camp get quiet.

When all was peaceful, he sat up, dressed silently, and taking his Colt, rolled under the stack yard fence and crawled to a stack. Haystacks made good beds, according to Reb Conyear, particularly when

there was an enemy loose in the camp.

Reb found some loose hay at the base of a stack and, still crawling, prepared to go to sleep on it. As he settled down he felt something long and hard under him. An exploring hand divulged its identity. It was a rifle in a saddle scabbard. Reb almost yelled when he felt the cold iron of the gun. Here was the weapon that had dropped Tobe Summers. Reb would have bet on it.

Reb restrained himself. This surely was not the time or the place to come out dragging that gun. And it wasn't the place to make a bed either. Reb crawled off his pile of loose hay. He moved a good distance away, settled himself and tried to stay awake. Maybe somebody would come to get that rifle. Maybe they would come soon.

But cutting and stacking hay is hard work. Reb was tired. Try as he might, after he had listened and watched for so long a time, his eyes closed and he dozed. Periodically he would awake, only to doze again. And so Reb Conyear did not hear a man come stealing from the camp to the stack yard, nor did he hear him leave.

The next morning, Reb got up from his hay pile and crawled over the stack yard fence to go to the fire. Most of the men were still asleep, but the cook was up and so was Granny Block.

Reb could not avoid Granny's eyes as he crossed the stack yard fence. Going to the fence from his bed, Reb had made occasion to walk across the loose hay he had first chosen for a sleeping site. His feet told him that the rifle was gone, and Reb cursed his drowsiness.

Granny said nothing as Reb came to the fire, and as the cook was yelling for wood, Reb took the axe and attacked the woodpile. The other men arose, rubbing the sleep from their eyes and putting on their hats as soon as they sat up. Reb looked around and spotted Walters. Walters was getting dressed, and next to him Tom

Dally was getting out of bed, cursing.

Hay was cut that morning. At noon, Harvey Little came into the camp and ate dinner with the crew. Blackie had not accompanied the crew on the move from the upper meadow, and Harvey was the first Triangle Dot rider they had seen since the day before. Accordingly, Little was besieged by questions which he could not answer. Indeed the tale of Tobe Summers' death and the advent of the deputy from Trinchera were news to Little.

He had, he explained, gone back from the ranch to the Bend line camp Sunday evening. Evidently Little held down the Bend camp and had just spent Sunday at headquarters. He listened avidly to what was told him, but made very little comment.

Granny Block did most of the talking, seeming to feel that a cowboy should be talked to by a cowboy, and in the course of the conversation Granny asked Little about fresh meat. Harvey told the old man that he had butchered a yearling and would bring over a side, but Granny shook his head.

"You'll be back through this evenin' on yore way to camp," he said. "I'll send a man over with you to get the meat."

It was left at that, and Little rode away on the bronc he was working.

The afternoon was abominably hot. The hay cut during the morning had cured sufficiently to rake and was now being

hauled in. Reb and Tom Dally were stacking, but because of the heat and the thunderheads that were rolling up over the mesa, Granny had put them on one stack and they were working together.

Reb was preoccupied. He had paid scarcely any attention to Little at noon, for when he had put his bed together before dinner he had found that the .41 Colt he had taken from Walters was gone. That meant that someone had visited his bed during his absence last night. Reb believed that someone to be Walters, but he couldn't be sure.

He would have bet that had he been in his bed he wouldn't have wakened in the morning. But that was conjecture. As far as Walters was concerned, he had made no sign that he knew of Reb or that he was aware of his existence.

The racks came in to the stack and their loads were pitched off. Granny was not getting any more hay down, and that meant that he thought it would rain. It also meant that Reb and Dally had plenty of work. Walters and his partner brought a rack up and stopped. The man who had been helping Walters load was driving, and back of the rack Walters leaned on his fork. There was a grin on the driver's face. Reb, hot and sweating, didn't pay much attention to the grin. It might have been well if he had.

There can be a good deal of horseplay in a granger camp, and when there is



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horseplay, it is rough. The driver was grinning because, in loading the rack he and Walters had found a five-foot diamondback rattler under the shock. Walters had deterred his partner from killing the snake.

"We'll load him on," Walters had said, "then we'll pitch him off to the boys on the stack an' have some fun."

The other man had agreed. Accordingly, when the load was finished, they had returned for the snake, caught it with a fork and pitched it up. At the moment he was on top of the load, caught between the tines of the fork upon which Walters so nonchalantly leaned.

Reb was at the front of the stack. The team stopped so that the rear of the wagon was opposite Reb, and Walters gave his fork an extra shove to load the implement, caught the handle well up, and pitched hurriedly.

Reb caught a flash of something in the air that was not hay. He heard the buzz of the snake and stabbed out with his fork to deflect the descending hay. He knew that there was a snake coming down and he didn't intend to be under it. At the same time Walters yelled, "Look out—snake!" and Tom Dally, further back on the stack, sprang forward.

Reb had sent the forkful of hay and the snake toward the side of the stack with his hurried lunge. The hay, always slippery underfoot, slid with him and he went down, losing his fork as he fell. Dally, his fork uplifted, was lunging forward, and Reb's astonished eyes read murder in Dally's face.

THERE was no time to think of snakes now. Rattlers are bad enough, but they are not quite as certain as a five-tined fork driven by a brawny arm. Reb tried to roll, and again hay slid and Reb was cascading with it over the edge of the stack, while Dally, unable to stop his lunge, brought his fork

down into the spot where Reb had lain.

Over on the wagon, Walters and his partner were laughing at the confusion they had caused. The snake had slid off the edge of the stack and a man coming in with another rack of hay had halted his team, leaped down and was now killing the snake. Reb Conyear, hitting the ground, found his leg bent under him. He was scarcely able to rise. Granny Block was running into the stack yard, swearing.

It didn't take Granny long to read the riot act to Walters and the other man on the rack. His talk was short and to the point. Another stunt like that, vowed Granny, and the two would be walking to Trinchera.

In the meantime, Dally had come down from the stack and was helping Reb to his feet. "I sure tried to get that rattler before he got to you," said Dally earnestly. "Hell! He was six foot long it looked like. That was a fine joke to play, pitchin' a snake up on the stack. If he'd of bit you, it'd been so long, an' no mistake."

The man spoke so earnestly, seemed so sincere, that Reb almost believed him. Still he had seen Dally's face and the uplifted fork, and he had seen those bright tines flash down even as Reb slid from the stack. But Dally was helping Reb up and brushing him off, and Reb could hardly accuse him of attempted murder. The incident had been a practical joke and an accident to all appearances, and Reb could not be sure that it wasn't. When Granny Block came around the stack, Reb was limping over to pick up his fork and apparently the whole thing was over.

"I told them two that I'd fire 'em if they tried another stunt like that," said Granny. "Now you drop it, Rusty. Don't you go jump 'em. Sabe?" He jabbed out a finger.

Reb made no reply. Limping over to the stack, he stuck his fork in the side, preparatory to climbing to the top. Dally was already on the top and holding out

his hand to help Reb. Granny watched his man anxiously as Reb went up.

Granny didn't want trouble in the hay-crew, but unless he was mistaken this Rusty boy wasn't going to drop the matter as it stood. In fact, Granny would have been disappointed if Reb had dropped the matter. Reb Conyear had become a favorite with the fat little boss of the granger wagon.

The crew managed to finish the stack before the rain began. With the rainfall, haying came to a standstill and the crew went to camp. Reb was slow in getting in because of his lame leg. When he did arrive, he found Walters and Dally under a wagon with some others. The men with Walters were chuckling over something, and as Reb limped up the laughter ceased. Reb squatted down so that he could look under the wagon, the rain dripping from his straw hat and beating soddenly on his shoulders.

"No more snakes," he said, quietly, looking Walters in the eye. "Try it another way next time an' be sure you make a job of it!"

Walters' face paled a little under Reb's stare. Then he turned to the man who sat beside him and spoke. Reb, his warning issued, had straightened and was limping toward his bed.

The camp was miserable in the rain. The wind blew gusts across the camp site, and the men got under wagons or sought what shelter they could find, there to look out at the storm, pull their wet clothing away from their bodies and roll cigarettes with moist fingers. Under the canvas fly that he had rigged for a sunshade, the cook was busy, moving around the fire, trying to get away from the smoke that seemed to follow wherever he went, swearing at the weather and at wet wood that refused to burn.

Reb Conyear, under the shelter of a rack, sat and sucked at his damp smoke and stared out at the scene, while under

the bedwagon Dally spoke to Walters, for the two were now alone.

"He's slippery as an eel," said Dally. "I was sure I had him with the fork, but he rolled off the edge of the stack. Why didn't you say you was goin' to bring in a snake an' throw it up?"

"Because I didn't know I was goin' to," answered Walters. "It was just a chance. If you'd got him with the fork. . . ." His voice trailed off.

"What did Pry say?" demanded Dally. "When's he comin' out?"

"As soon as he gets the money for the steers," answered Walters. "An' he's got somethin' on his mind besides that. We won't be pitchin' hay for long, Tom."

"It was a fool idea to do it at all, if you ask me," returned Dally irritably. "Why didn't Pry let us go to his place an' hole up? Why did he want us out here workin' like dogs?"

"I dunno." Walters looked across to the wagon under which Reb sat. "Pry's deep. There ain't nobody goin' to be lookin' hard at a granger crew an' men can drift in an' out. It gives a man an excuse to be in the country. Pry's got somethin' up his sleeve. He's slick, Pry is. Have you heard Granny say anythin'?"

"Not a word."

"Well," Walters shrugged, "he'll talk before long or I miss my guess. Tom, that son over there under that wagon is dangerous. I told Pry he was when I seen him here, an' Pry just grunted. We made two tries at him, last night an' today. I found the gun he took off me in Denver in his bedroll. I took it."

"You fool!" grated Dally. "Now he'll be lookin' out."

"He won't look out long," vowed Walters. "Next time I ain't goin' to be jokin'."

Dally squinted meditatively. "Maybe there won't be a next time," he said. "I wish I had my money from them steers an' was out of here."

CHAPTER FIVE

The Death Gun

THE rain held—not a hard, vicious rain, but a steady downpour. About six o'clock, when the cook had supper ready, Harvey Little, covered with a slicker, came into the hay camp. He ate with the crew under the cook's tent, sitting well out because, as he said, "A little more rain ain't goin' to make much difference to this slicker."

When the meal was over, Little said that he had to get along to camp, and again volunteered to bring over the side of beef. Granny Block was about to accept the offer when Reb interposed.

"I got a poncho in my bed, Mr. Block," he said. "I don't mind ridin' over an' bringin' back a quarter."

Granny looked at Reb, shrugged, seemed about to veto the suggestion, then changed his mind. "All right," he said. "You can go if you want to. The horses'll be in in a minute."

Granny's prediction was correct. Within a short time, Whitey Cosgrove brought the horses in and threw them into the rope corral. Harvey, his rope wet and stiff, managed to catch a horse for Reb and stood by while Reb got the poncho from his bedding and saddled. Then the two rode away, Reb to return in the morning with the beef.

The two talked little on the way to the camp. It was quite a piece down the river, across the hardpan. The rain beat on them steadily and Reb, already wet through, rode in silence. It was dark by the time the two had crossed the hardpan



and Little, turning in his saddle, said cheerily, "Not much further now. I'll bet that you'll be plenty glad to dry out."



Reb said that he would, and they rode on.

Presently a light appeared and Little turned again to his companion.

"Somebody holed up in the camp," he said. "Well, it won't make any difference. There's three beds anyhow. An' there'll be a fire built. That'll be somethin'."

Again Reb agreed. They rode into the

camp—two buildings, a house and a shed—and stopped. "You go on to the house," said Little. "I'll throw the horses in the corral and look after things."

Reb disregarded that. He accompanied Little to the corral where there were three or four horses, and did his own unsaddling. Little, when he had stripped his horse of his riding gear, drove one of the

Wingate approached the
body. . . .



horses over to a smaller, circular pen and then opened the corral gate. "Horse pasture," he explained needlessly. "I'll wrangle in the mornin'."

Reb nodded and followed Little toward the house.

When they opened the door, the room appeared deserted. A lamp burned on a table and another, darkened door, told of a room beyond. Little and Reb, stepping through, closed the door behind them and Little grunted.

"Somebody's been here sure enough," he said. "Went off an' left the light burnin'." Why—" There was surprise in his voice.

Reb, turning, followed Little's eyes.

The youngster was looking at a rifle in a sheath that stood in a corner.

"What's the matter?" asked Reb.

"My carbine," said Little. "Somebody taken it a month ago, an' here it is."

Laughter swallowed the rest of his words. Two girls, one dark, the other fair, came, bubbling with laughter, from the dark door of the other room. Charlotte McAlpine and Beryl White.

"Surprise! Surprise!" called Charlotte.

Indeed it was a surprise. Harvey Little recoiled a step and a grin widened on his face. "Well, what in the world—" he began.

"Beryl and I went out for a ride," explained Charlotte. "We rode up on the mesa and I said it would be fun if we came down to see you. So we did and the rain caught us. We're going to stay all night. You'll have to sleep in the barn."

"But your dad—" expostulated Harvey. "What'll he say, an' what'll your mother think?"

"Dad and mother have gone to Trinchera and won't be back till tomorrow," answered Charlotte. "And it will be perfectly proper anyway. I'll chaperone Beryl and she can chaperone me."

There were more arguments on the tip of Harvey's tongue, but he stilled them. Reb, looking at the boy, could see eagerness and perhaps longing in his eyes. Harvey Little was in love with Charlotte McAlpine, Reb would have bet his saddle on that, and looking at the girl he wasn't at all sure that she was not in love with Little.

It was then that Harvey thought of his guest. Gravely and courteously he introduced Reb. The girls nodded, Reb said that he was pleased to meet them.

Both men now stripped off their raincoats, Reb putting his poncho on a hook and Harvey hanging his slicker beside it. The girls had built a fire in the little sheet-iron stove and Reb, standing beside the

stove, turned his body until first one side and then the other side of his clothing steamed.

The conversation in the shack was lively, Reb was disregarded, left out, but that suited him. Harvey was chided for not being at home when his guests arrived. There were jokes made at his expense and he was kidded unmercifully, all of which he seemed to enjoy. Later the talk took a more serious tone.

"Beryl's going back to school with me next year," announced Charlotte McAlpine. "Her mother sold her brand and now she can go."

"Yore mother sold the Cross In A Box?" asked Harvey. "I thought she'd keep that."

Beryl White laughed. "She sold it," she said. "I thought that she'd keep it, too. I didn't think anyone would buy it. But Mr. Pry wanted it for some reason or other and he gave Mama six hundred dollars for the brand and what cattle there were."

Harvey Little was frowning. "There wasn't more than eight or ten head of Cross In A Box left," he said. "Six hundred dollars seems mighty big money for that."

"Maybe he wanted to send Beryl to school to get her out of the way," laughed Charlotte. "Mr. Pry has been mighty attentive to Mrs. White, you know, in the last few months."

"Charlotte!" said Beryl White indignantly, and both Charlotte and Harvey Little laughed.

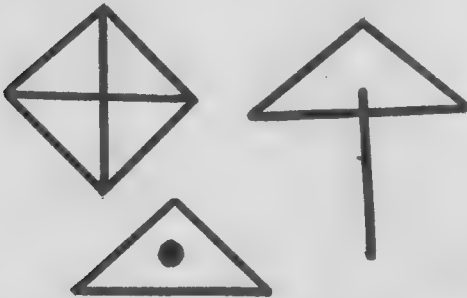
The talk went on. Generalities, mention of dances past and in the future, one thing and another. Reb yawned. After all, he had had a hard day. That yawn brought the others to a realization of the time. Harvey said good night to the girls, told Reb to come with him, and the two men donning their raincoats again and taking a lantern, went out to bed down in the barn.

There, as they made ready for the night, Reb asked a question.

"That Cross In A Box brand," he said. "How's it put on?"

There was dust on the board floor of the barn loft where the two were standing and Harvey Little bent down and drew a diagram in the dust. "Like this," he said. "On the right hip. I'm goin' back to the house a minute. There's somethin' I forgot."

Leaving the lantern, he went down the ladder from the loft. Reb bent over the pattern traced in the dust. "So," drawled Reb Conyear softly. "Like that, on the right hip." Beside the pattern Little had traced, Reb drew another, and then, staring at the two, a third. He looked down at them—Cross In A Box, Triangle Dot and Pinetree.



"I'd kind of like to have a brand like that myself," said Reb softly. "Anyhow in this country."

HARVEY LITTLE returned from the house with two blankets, one of which he tossed to Reb. There was a faraway, bright look in Harvey's eyes, his hat was pushed back and there was rain on his cheeks. Reb grinned. A man doesn't walk in the rain with his hat pushed back unless he is considerably perturbed and Reb had reason to believe that Harvey had not gone back to the house solely for the blankets.

Both men undressed and Reb hung his still-damp clothes over a rafter where they might dry somewhat. Wrapping themselves in the two blankets, the two men lay down on the musty hay and Little blew out the light.

A call from outside awakened Reb Conyear. Someone was calling. "Little! Little!" and the rain was still dripping suddenly on the roof. It was still dark, so black in the loft that Reb could not see his hand when he reached out of his blankets. A match flamed and Harvey Little touched the flame to the lantern-wick.

"What is it?" called Harvey.

The voice came again from outside. "This is Wingate. Put on your clothes an' come down here."

By lantern light the two in the loft hurriedly dressed. Then, with poncho covering Reb and slicker covering Harvey, the two went down the ladder and out of the barn. There was a light in the house,



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showing that the girls were up, and in front of the barn there were three men on horses. As the lantern light reflected wetly from the group, Reb recognized Herb Wingate, Granny Block, and Scott Davis, the deputy from Trinchera.

"What's up, Wingate?" asked Little.

It was Scott Davis that answered that question. "Come on in the house, Harvey," said Davis solemnly. "We want to talk to you."

In the house, the girls showed their frightened faces through the bedroom door.

Scott Davis was uneasy. He glanced at the girls, back to Little, and then at the lamp on the table. "Where were you day before yesterday, Harvey?" asked Davis.

"Why—" Little considered the question, "I rode below here that day, Scott. Rode bog along the river. What's the matter?"

Davis walked over and picked up the carbine that stood sheathed, in a corner of the room. "Your gun?" he asked, looking at Little.

Harvey nodded. "Funny, too," he said. "That gun's been gone for a month, pretty near. Then when Rusty an' me come in this evenin', it was standing there in the corner. What's this all about, Scott?"

"It's all about this," said Scott Davis. "Tobe Summers was killed day before yesterday. Somebody bushwhacked him out on the hardpan."

"An' you come down here askin' me about it?" Little's voice was level.

Scott Davis brought a spent shell from his pocket. Slowly he slid the carbine from its sheath and opening the breech lifted the gun until he looked down the barrel at the light. "It's fouled," he said to no one in particular. "I done more than come down to ask you, Harvey. I'm goin' to take you back with me in the mornin'. Back to Trinchera. You see, you bought the last box of UMC cartridges that Pry had at his store an'—" he paused

—"this shell was found in the willows by the hardpan. It's the shell that killed Summers an' it's a UMC." He held out the bit of metal.

"But that gun was stolen, I tell you," exclaimed Little. "It was just brought back tonight! Hell, Scott, you think I killed Summers! Why would I want to kill him?"

"I don't know," said Davis slowly. "Summers was a stock detective that the Association sent in here. We looked at his papers. I don't know why you'd want to kill him, but your gun's been shot an' it's got UMC shells in it an' Summers was killed with a UMC. I'm goin' to take you in."

"I tell you that the gun was taken," reiterated Little. "It was just brought back tonight. Why, Scott—"

Wingate interrupted. "That's an old stall, Little," he said gruffly but he was grinning.

Harvey Little wheeled and faced the foreman. "So it was you that brought Scott out?" he said. "I didn't think you'd go that far with it, Wingate. I sure didn't."

Wingate opened his mouth to speak, his face flushing angrily. Then he thought better of the idea and closed his mouth again. There was something between Herb Wingate and Harvey Little, Reb saw. He wondered what it was. His eyes followed Wingate's look and Reb saw that the Triangle Dot foreman was watching the girls in the doorway. So that was it! Herb Wingate was in love with Charlotte McAlpine, and he was getting rid of Harvey Little's competition.

Granny Block shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He too was looking at the door. "We'd better make some coffee," said Granny. "You girls get dressed an' come on out here. Charlotte, you ought to be spanked, runnin' off from home this way."

"We were caught by the rain," Char-

lotte said defensively, glaring at Herb.

"Well," said Granny, "you go get dressed now."

It seemed as though morning would never come. The men sat around the little room, Granny squatting beside Reb, who in turn squatted against the wall. Scott Davis tried to get Harvey Little to talk, but Little had shut up like a clam. He simply stared at Wingate and Wingate could not abide that stare. The Triangle Dot foreman moved uneasily around the room and talked to Granny and to Scott Davis. The girls, dressed, had come from the bedroom and Charlotte McAlpine had walked defiantly over and seated herself beside Harvey Little.

When morning finally came, Wingate went out to look after the horses while Granny Block prepared a meager breakfast. Reb went out when Wingate departed and he watched the foreman ride out into the horse pasture after mounts. Wingate, Reb noticed, did not have a rifle on his saddle.

When breakfast was finished Harvey Little, under Davis' supervision, put a few possessions in his warsack for the ride into Trinchera.

"We might as well go," said the deputy.

They filed out of the house. Reb, not forgetting his errand, went to the meat safe back of the house, Granny Block accompanying him. There was a fresh beef in the meat safe, a small beef that had been split. They quartered the meat and finding sacks, wrapped the quarters and carried them around the house to where the horses were tied.

"You might as well take one of these, Harvey," said Granny. "An' you can take one, Herb."

Accordingly, with Block, Reb, Little and Wingate each carrying a quarter of beef in the saddle, the little procession started. The rain had stopped and the morning was bright.

CHAPTER SIX

Cold Anger

WHEN the little party of horsemen came to the hardpan, Reb noticed a string of cattle coming down from the mesa. Cattle going to water. Wingate, who rode beside Reb, also saw the cattle. "I want to look at that bunch," he said. "Take the meat, Rusty."

When he reached the cattle, they were almost at the river. They lined up along the river bank drinking, and Wingate waited. The others drew closer and then turned a little toward the mesa. The river was high because of the rain. Wingate, when the cattle had drunk, separated three cows from the others and pushed them into the channel. The cattle swam, quartering across the stream and heading toward the sandbar that barely showed because of the high water. The animals went downstream a long distance and then emerged on the bar and stood there, water lapping at their feet. Then a cow stepped off into the other channel and pushed across and the other two followed her. Wingate came loping back.

"Pry's cattle," he explained. "I shoved 'em over to his side of the river."

Reb was silent. A great light had suddenly dawned upon the young rider. So that was where the Pinetree steers had gone! Reb cursed himself for a simpleton. Of course. The Pinetrees had run. They had split up against the mesa and the bunch that had gone toward the *malpais* had been picked up by the riders who were waiting for them. It was as simple as that.

The riders had held the steers on the *malpais* and driven them down the slope to the hardpan. No tracks on the *malpais*, it was too hard, so hard that not even a shod horse would leave much sign. Then, when the *malpais* broke into the hardpan, the riders had again held the steers close. No tracks on the hardpan

either. The hardpan went into the river, and by working in the shallow water at the edge of the canyon, the thieves had held the cattle in the water and drifted them downstream, out to the sandbar and on across. Naturally the steers had spread out and come out of the water singly and a long distance downstream. No wonder that the Pinetree riders had sworn that those four hundred head of big steers had sprouted wings. There just hadn't been any chance for a slip. The question of how the steers had gone was answered.

But there were other questions. Somebody had started the Pinetree herd to running—someone who was hooked up in this country, who knew that there were riders waiting to take advantage of the run, who knew the country, and someone who had been at the herd when it ran. That left three people: Chuck Blossom, Wheat Andrews and Bill Walters. Chuck Blossom was either in Denver or on the trail back to San Angelo. Chuck was out. Bill Walters was working at the Triangle Dot granger wagon, and Wheat Andrews was missing. Wheat had gone to the herd that night. Reb had heard him leave camp. And Wheat had picked the bed ground. Maybe Wheat was the man.

But here was Walters, dressed up like a granger and chummy with Tom Dally, and Walters and Dally had tried to kill Reb. That snake business had been no accident. Walters' gun was gone, too. Reb stared straight ahead and forgot to ride like a farmer. He was too busy thinking of other things.

When the riders reached the hay camp, Wingate had a surprise for Granny. "I'm goin' to be shorthanded," he said abruptly. "Summers is dead. Little is goin' to jail an' Blackie Cook quit yesterday. I want to take a man of yours, Granny."

"Cook quit?" said Block. "How come?"

"Went to work for Pry," said Wing-

ate. "Pry's movin' some stuff. I'd like to have Whitey."

"Well, I'll be durned," announced Granny. "Whitey! Of all the—"

"He's been wantin' to work for me a long time," interrupted Wingate. "I'm goin' to try him out. I can always fire him, you know. Send out for him, will you?"

There was nothing for Granny to do but give in. The cow work came first and the cow boss clearly superseded the granger foreman. Granny looked around.

"You go out to the cavy an' send Whitey in," he said sourly to Reb. "You can wrangle horses, I reckon."

Reb nodded and, mounting his horse, rode out of camp.

The cavy was a mile down the river. Reb and Granny had seen the horses as they rode toward camp. Reb found Whitey and gave him the message. Whitey grinned, thanked Reb, and started his horse toward the hay camp. Before he had gone ten feet, he had the horse at a lope.

Left alone with the *remuda*, Reb rolled a cigarette and squinted an eye at the sky. So Blackie Cook was working for Pry.

Cocking one leg over the horn of his saddle, Reb pondered.

Mentally, he came at length to what had occurred that morning—Wingate shoving the cattle into the river. The river had been up and Reb wondered why Wingate had put the cattle across the stream, swollen as it was. He hadn't seen the brands on those cattle. Maybe Wingate hadn't wanted anyone to see them.

Reb wished that he might see the crossing again. Why shouldn't he? He was free from camp and certainly the horses were mobile. It wasn't far to the hardpan, not more than two miles. Reb put his loose foot back in the stirrup and, circling his horses, started them toward the river.

At the edge of the hardpan he left the

cavvy and rode on. The horses would work back toward camp, he knew, and they wouldn't leave the bottom. It would be no trick to pick them up as he returned. Out on the hardpan he stopped and tried to find where the cattle Wingate had driven had entered the river. He couldn't find the place. The water was going down rapidly, and was not nearly so high as it had been.

Reb looked out and saw the top of the sandbar, and on the sandbar was a black object. Probably a snag washed down by the high water and stranded on the bar. Still it might be something else. Curiosity prompted Reb. He kicked his horse off into the channel.

THE channel was deep and the horse had to swim a few yards. The water shallowed again and Reb splashed along. He reached the sandbar and with his pony's feet sinking into the soft sand, rode a hundred yards downstream.

His eyes widened and his face grew white beneath its tan. There, emerging from the sand, was the arm and shoulder of a man.

For a little time Reb sat and looked at the thing he had found. Then, dismounting, he kicked at the wet sand until the shoulder and neck and head of the body were exposed. The face was bloated, swollen out of all recognition, but there was no mistaking the clothing—the brown

neckerchief and the gray shirt with a little notebook, pulp now, protruding from the pocket. This was Wheat Andrews! No question now as to who had started the cattle on their run. No question now at all.

Reb looked back toward the hay camp, invisible some three miles up the river. "Damn you!" he almost yelled.

After a few moments he brought himself back to facts. He couldn't leave the body where it was. Another rise in the stream might send it miles away with the current. How should he dispose of it?

There was a saddle rope on the saddle and Reb uncoiled it and fastened the loop about that rigid arm. Then, mounting, he set his horse back and the body came out of the sand with a sucking, sickening sound. Towing all that remained of Wheat Andrews, Reb started back toward the hardpan. He slid it over the hardpan until he reached the mesa. There, among the broken *malpais* rock, he freed the rope and piled the rough chunks of lava over Wheat Andrews.

Reb mounted again and started back up river, and when he reached the edge of the hardpan, found a grazing horse. The sight of the animal restored some sanity to Reb. He could not ride back to the hay camp, call Bill Walters out and invite him to defend himself. That would not do. Reb had no doubt that Walters had killed Wheat Andrews, but there

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had been other men with Walters and behind Walters was a cunning brain that had planned it all. Reb was sure of that too. Gradually his flaming anger subsided into a cold, hard rage. His mind was ice cold and ice hard. He would find the man who was behind it all, the man who had planned the theft and who profited most by it. That man would pay and then he, Reb Conyear, would collect justly from Bill Walters. Reb swung his mount to pick up the grazing horse, and driving the animal, headed toward the others of the loosely scattered *remuda*. With the bell on an old gray mare tinkling, Reb drove the cavy back up the river.

Toward noon, when the sun was high overhead, Granny came out for Reb. The hay had dried enough to cut and he wanted the horses brought in. The two hazed the *remuda* toward camp and threw the horses into the rope corral. Smoke went straight up from the fire and the men of the crew were eating dinner. Reb went over and joined them. While they ate, the cook talked to Granny, and when the meal was done Block came over to Reb.

"Get a team for cookie to drive to the ranch this evenin'," he said shortly. "He needs some grub."

Reb nodded. Rising, he put his plate and cup in the dishpan and walked over to get his horse. He still limped a little from his fall from the stack. His path led him close to where Walters and Dally were sitting.

As Reb passed, Walters, a grin on his face, pursed his lips and buzzed. The sound was almost that of a snake and Reb wheeled. As he looked down at Walters, his rage overcame him. One strong, brown hand reached down and seized Walters' shoulder. Reb jerked the man to his feet and flung him away.

Walters recovered his balance. "Damn you!" he roared, and leaped at Reb.

If Walters had tried for his gun, Reb would have killed him in that instant. But Walters did not try. His fists were swinging as he leaped in, and one big fist struck Reb's head and made him reel. In another instant the two were clenched and Walters was bringing up a knee at Reb's groin.

But Reb, recovering from the blow, arched his back, and the blow did not go home. Reb's left hand was sunk in Walters' neck and his right swung short, chopping blows that spatted viciously. Then those chopping blows ceased.

The right hand joined at Walters' throat and stayed there. Clawing, kicking, swinging futile blows, Walters tried to break that grip, but the hands clung, leech-like. Walters' struggles weakened. Gradually he bent back until, at length, his knees gave way and he fell, his purpling face turned up to the sky, and Reb Conyear, his face contorted, sank his fingers deeper and deeper into the man's relaxing throat.

It was Granny Block who stopped Reb, Granny who caught his arms, and sent Reb rolling from Walters. Reb scrambled to his feet. His eyes were still dark with rage.

"Stop it!" snapped Granny Block. "Stop it, Rusty!"

Gradually the red veil lifted from Reb's eyes and he could see the men and the camp again. Dally stood with his hand under the bib of his overalls. Walters was on the ground, his mouth open and his chest heaving as he struggled for breath. Granny Block stood, legs spread apart, facing Reb.

"Because a man buzzes at you like a snake is no sign you got to kill him!" snapped Block. "You're through. You can go to the ranch with Cookie this evenin'. Mebbe McAlpine will send you in from there."

Reb nodded dully. The rage was running out of him in a flood. He felt weak.

Dally took his hand from the bib of his overalls and walked to where Walters lay. Bending down, he lifted the man so that Walters could breathe more easily.

"Get your beddin' an' put it in the wagon!" Block ordered Reb. "I'll give you a note to McAlpine an' he'll pay you."

Reb, collecting himself, walked over to where his bed lay and slowly began to put it together.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The End of a Granger

HALF an hour later, bearing a note to McAlpine, Reb rode out of the hay camp sitting beside the cook on the spring seat of the wagon. Whitey Cosgrove's bedding bumped beside Reb's bedroll in the back of the wagon. He was, Reb decided, well content to go. There was not much more that he could do with the granger wagon.

Now, Reb felt, he needed to be free. He must inform Scott Davis in Trinchera of the discovery of Wheat Andrew's body. Also he must write of that discovery to Hi Metcalf. He would send two letters, Reb decided, one to Denver and one to San Angelo. He would be sure to catch Metcalf at one place or the other.

The cook was smoking a pipe. The strong fumes of the tobacco crinkled Reb's nostrils and in self-defense he reached for his own makings. As he rolled his smoke, the cook spoke.

"Rider, ain't yuh?" said the cook.

"What makes you think so?"

"I been one," answered the cook. "You aimed to kill that fella."

"Mebbe."

The cook puffed twice, spat, and eyed. "Too bad."

"What?" asked Reb.

"Too bad you didn't." The cook spat again.

Reb thought that over. He waited for

the cook to continue, but the cook had pumped his well dry. Gradually Reb retired into his own mind. Grimly there he ticked off facts.

First, he knew where the steers had gone. They had gone across the river. He knew who had killed Wheat Andrews. Bill Walters. He knew too who had handled the steers, or at least he believed he knew. The brands that he had drawn in the dust on the barn floor were pretty good proof to Reb that Jake Pry was the



BILL WALTERS

man who handled the cattle. Jake Pry had bought the Cross In A Box, and the Pinetree could be run into a dandy Cross In A Box. Here Reb scowled.

The brands were enough evidence to Reb, but they might not be to anyone else. Save for getting the Pinetree steers or collecting for them, Reb's job was done, and yet, somehow, he didn't feel that it was done. A sentimental fool, Reb told himself. Just a crying old woman. But Harvey Little was in jail in Trinchera and Charlotte McAlpine loved Harvey. Reb liked Harvey himself. And Tobe Summers had been killed, and there was a confusion of rifles around the granger camp. With a start, Reb recalled that Wingate had not been carrying a rifle on his saddle that morning, whereas he had

been sure when Reb had first seen him.

"Might as well see the thing through," he said to himself, the words small in his mouth.

"What's that?" demanded the cook.

"Nothin'," said Reb Conyear.

When the two arrived at the Triangle Dot the cook halted the wagon in the yard and both men got down from the seat. As they started toward the house the door was flung violently open and Charlotte McAlpine came out. She flung herself across the porch and down the steps and turned to face McAlpine who had appeared in the doorway.

"I don't care what you say," said the girl angrily, flinging the words at her father. "I'm going to Trinchera and I'm going to marry Harvey! He didn't do it. What would he shoot a man for? He hasn't been stealing your cattle."

"Come back here!" commanded McAlpine, his face red with anger.

But the girl was striding off, away from the house. Reb coughed and McAlpine, turning his head, saw the two men for the first time.

"What do you want?"

The cook spat. "I came in for some grub," he said laconically. "I reckon I'll go to the cookshack." He turned and limped away.

"Well?" said McAlpine, staring at Reb.

"Block sent me in for my time," said Reb. "Here's a note."

McAlpine took the piece of paper that Reb extended and glanced at it. "Fightin', huh?" he snapped. "I've a good mind to take it out of you. You grangers think you can come in an' raise hob with a man's outfit. I—". McAlpine was mad, Reb realized, but Reb himself was not in the best of temper.

"You got a sight better mind to set down an' write out my time," he drawled.

Hot black eyes met eyes with golden flecks in them, and McAlpine was the first to look away. "I'm kind of sore," he

said apologetically. "You go on to the bunkhouse an' stay for the night. I'll take you into town in the mornin'. I got somethin' else to look after right now."

With that he came down from the porch and taking the same direction that Charlotte had taken, hurried away. Reb walked to the wagon, got his bed and went on to the bunkhouse. Instead of going around to the old rock building, he entered the new cabin that the riders used. There he dumped his bed on the floor and walking over to the packing box, sat down.

About five o'clock the Triangle Dot riders began to come in. Whitey Cosgrove was the first to arrive. He still wore shoes and bib overalls, but he swaggered when he came through the door and hailed Reb.

Reb answered the greeting and, when they had talked a few moments, got up and went out. When he returned, Whitey had his bed unrolled. Reb went back to his box and sat down. His roving eyes fixed on a scabbarded rifle, standing in a corner, and rising, Reb walked over and picked up the gun. It hadn't been there when he had left.

"Nice gun," he said to Whitey. "Whose is it?"

"Wingate's," said Whitey, a tinge of uneasiness in his voice. "Why?"

"Don't see many forty-four-forties any more," answered Reb, sliding the weapon out of the scabbard. "I always liked 'em."

"Herb's touchy about his gun," said Whitey. "Better put it up."

Reb returned the weapon to the scabbard and set it back in the corner.

Further talk was cut off by the arrival of other riders. They took Reb's presence silently, saying nothing. One by one they came in, Wingate the last to arrive, and when they were all in the cook called them to supper.

When Reb left the bunkhouse he noted that the hay camp cook had left with the wagon. Reb took his place at the table,

saying nothing to the others, ate his food, and after the meal stepped back over the bench and went outside. There, while he rolled a smoke, Wingate came up to him.

"Quit Block, Rusty?" he answered.

"Fired," Reb answered.

Wingate paused a moment and then spoke again. "Pry will be cuttin' hay now," he said. "You might get on with him."

"Thanks." Reb strolled away.

Whitey Cosgrove was at the corner of the bunkhouse and Reb joined him there. Apparently some of the taint of the granger still clung to Whitey, for the other riders left him alone. The two were by themselves and Reb, squatting on a heel, looked up at the young fellow.

"Whitey," he drawled, "when did you bring Wingate's rifle in to the ranch?"

Whitey was caught unprepared by the question. "This morn—" he began, and then: "I didn't bring Wingate's rifle in."

"Don't lie, Whitey. There's hay in the scabbard of that rifle. It was hid in the old stack at the hay camp. I felt it the night we moved in there. You got it out of that stack, Whitey. Wingate told you to. You put it in your bed an' when we brought your bed in you unloaded it an' put it in the corner."

"What if I did?" snapped Whitey.

"Nothin'," drawled Reb softly. "It just makes you accessory to murder, that's

all. They hang a man for that out here."

Whitey's gasp told Reb that the words had gone home.

"You keep your mouth shut an' say nothin', an' I'll keep mine shut," said Reb. "I ain't talkin'. But if you tell Wingate, I'll—"

"I won't tell nobody," Whitey said earnestly. "I sure won't."

You'd be a fool if you did." Reb got up. "Well, good night, Whitey," he said, his voice kindly. "Sleep good."

REB was grinning as he walked away. He could imagine how well Whitey Cosgrove would sleep. Whitey wouldn't sleep at all unless Reb was mistaken. Well, that couldn't be helped. Reb had the information that he wanted. It looked to Reb Conyear very much as though Herb Wingate was the man that had killed Tobe Summers.

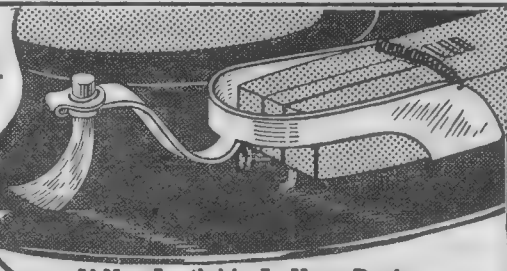
Reb slept with the others in the bunkhouse that night, and while Whitey tossed and turned the night through, Reb lay quietly awake, thinking. In the morning, after breakfast, McAlpine came out and told Reb that he would leave for town shortly.

When the buckboard stopped at the bunkhouse for Reb and his bedroll, McAlpine, face stern, was occupying the seat beside Charlotte. The girl was subdued and in her eyes showed signs of weeping. Reb loaded his bed, climbed in the back,

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and McAlpine started the team moving.

For the first few miles there was silence on the seat of the buckboard, and then McAlpine spoke.

"I'm not goin' Harvey's bond 'because you're in love with him, Charlotte," he said gravely. "I'm goin' it because no man can say that I ever let a man of mine down. Scott Davis says—"

"Scott Davis is Pry's man," snapped the girl. "I wouldn't believe him any more than I'd believe Jake Pry. You know yourself that you told mother and me that you thought Jake Pry wasn't honest. You were—"

"I know nothing of Pry's honesty," said McAlpine. "I do know that when he bought the Cross In A Box brand from Mrs. White he laid himself open to suspicion. I've written to Denver and to Pueblo and other points to see if there've been Cross In A Box cattle marketed. If I find that there have been, then I'll talk to Jake Pry.

"There were only a few heads of Cross In A Box cattle, and Allan White stopped using that brand before he died. Now I've told you more than I meant, Charlotte. I—"

Apparently Ian McAlpine recalled Reb's presence for the first time. He looked back over his shoulder. Reb had closed his eyes when McAlpine stopped talking. To all appearances Reb was asleep.

So Ian McAlpine had seen what could be done with a Cross In A Box brand, had he? That accounted for the presence of Tobe Summers on the Triangle Dot. Well, he'd show McAlpine something else that could be done with a Cross In A Box.

Then the thought flashed into Reb's mind that McAlpine had written for information to Pueblo and to Denver. That information might be valuable to McAlpine, but it would be doubly valuable to Reb. He must disclose his identity to get that information. But Reb wasn't

ready right now to say just who he was.

When the buckboard reached Trinchera and stopped before Pry's store, McAlpine got down and shook Reb's shoulder. Reb, yawning, seemed to waken.

"I'll pay you off," said McAlpine curtly. "Here." He brought bills from his pocket and, detaching several, held them out. "Here's yore wages," he said.

Reb took the money, said, "Thanks," gruffly, and then asked, "You goin' to be in town long, McAlpine?"

"I don't know," answered McAlpine. "I won't leave before noon. Why?"

"I'll mebbe try to get another job," answered Reb, "and I'd like to have you for a reference."

McAlpine grunted at that, and turning, walked up the street toward a small cottage before which hung a little sign. The sign read: L. M. HIGLEY, M.D. AND JUSTICE OF THE PEACE. Charlotte McAlpine was already standing at the gate below the sign. Reb watched McAlpine join his daughter and saw the two walk to the cottage.

When McAlpine and Charlotte had disappeared into the cottage, Reb turned. There was a barber shop half a block down the street. Reb walked over.

Inside the little building, the barber quit a game of dominoes, and stepped behind his chair. Reb shook his head. "Bath first," he said, "then I'll get the works—haircut and shave. Say, I got two bundles down in Pry's warehouse. What's the chances of gettin' one of you to bring 'em here?" Coins clinked suggestively in Reb's pocket as he spoke.

"I'll go get 'em," an idle loafer said eagerly. "You got a check or somethin' for 'em?"

Reb held out two small pieces of pasteboard and a silver dollar. "That'll be fine," he said. "Here's the stubs off the tags. You bring 'em here."

"The bathroom's in the back," said the barber. "There's clean towels inside."

Reb lunged for Walters'
throat. . . .



"An' tha'll be fine, too," said Reb, moving toward the door the barber had indicated. "Just throw that canvas sack inside when you get it here."

The idler nodded and Reb, stepping through, closed the bathroom door.

An hour and fifteen minutes later Reb Conyear emerged from the barber shop. Rusty, the granger hand had gone in; Reb Conyear, bright eyed, clean-shaven, his rusty locks trimmed, stepped out. "I'll leave my saddle here a while," he said to the barber, and the barber, his eyes

still wide at the metamorphosis, nodded. Boots kicking up little clouds of dust, Reb went up the street.

When he came to Pry's store, he hesitated. McAlpine's buckboard was still standing in front of the store. Reb turned to enter and at that moment McAlpine, accompanied by Charlotte and Harvey Little, came out. The girl's hand was tucked possessively through Little's arm and she was smiling, but McAlpine's face wore a frown.

"Mr. McAlpine," said Reb Conyear.

McAlpine turned. For a moment he did not recognize the speaker. Then his lips parted and his eyes widened. "You—" he began.

"I'd like to talk to you a minute," said Reb.

He stepped aside and McAlpine, surprise still written in his eyes, followed. Little and the girl stared at Reb, their faces puzzled. Reb pulled an envelope from his pocket and tendered it to McAlpine.

"Read that," he said.

McAlpine drew a paper from an envelope, and unfolding it read:

To those concerned:

The bearer is Reb Conyear, employed by the Pinetree Brand of San Angelo, Texas. Any assistance rendered him by peace officers or others will be appreciated.

Hiram Metcalf.

"I work for Hi Metcalf," Reb said, as McAlpine refolded the paper and returned it to the envelope. "I'm here lookin' up some trouble for him. We lost four hundred head of Pinetree steers a little less than a month ago."

"You came to the ranch," said McAlpine. "I remember now. You were looking for cattle that had run. You—"

"Lemme talk a minute," said Reb.

QUICKLY then, touching only the high spots, Reb Conyear told Ian McAlpine the things he knew. Those things he surmised he did not touch upon. McAlpine listened wordlessly.

"I heard yuh talkin' when we were comin' in," concluded Reb. "You had seen what that Cross In A Box would do to yore Triangle Dot Brand. Can you see what it would do to a Pinetree?"

McAlpine nodded.

"An' Wheat Andrews, the Pinetree wagon boss, is lyin' under a pile of rocks where I put him," Reb said grimly. "I got to account for that to Metcalf."

"What do you want to do?" asked Mc-

Alpine. "Pry is out of town. He's at his ranch. I don't see—"

"I ain't told yuh all of it," said Reb honestly. "There's some more that I'm guessin' at. Do you think Little shot Summers?"

"Who else?" demanded McAlpine. "His rifle was found in the camp an' there was a UMC shell found, and he had bought the last UMC's that Pry had. I went on his bond, but—" McAlpine glanced down the street where Harvey Little stood beside his daughter.

"They got the bullet that killed Summers?" asked Reb.

"Doc's got it," answered McAlpine. "But what—"

"Will you vouch for me to him?" queried Reb.

McAlpine considered for a moment. "I will," he decided. "I've heard of Hi Metcalf. You ought to be all right, workin' for him."

"Thanks," said Reb. "Let's go down there."

McAlpine nodded and, stepping away from Reb, spoke to Harvey and Charlotte. The two turned back to reenter the store and McAlpine rejoined Reb. Together the two walked down the street, heading for the doctor's cottage.

"Where's Davis?" asked Reb as they walked.

"Out with Pry," answered McAlpine. He works for Pry in the store an' does some ranch work."

Reb frowned.

McAlpine's knock on the cottage door was answered by a small, thin, white-haired man who peered at the two through thick-lensed glasses. "Come in, Ian," he greeted. "Did you decide that you didn't want to sign that bond after all?"

"This is Reb Conyear, Doc Higley," said McAlpine. "He's here on business. Show Doc yore letter, Conyear."

Reb passed over Metcalf's letter, and when Doc Higley had read it through

he handed it back. "Well?" he asked, "What can I do for you, Mr. Conyear? I know Hi Metcalf. Set a leg for one of his riders once. What is it you want?"

"I'd like to see the bullet you took out of Tobe Summers," Reb answered.

"In here," said Higley.

He led the way into a little, littered room that evidently served as both justice and medical office. There, from a desk, he picked up a slug of lead and passed it to Reb. Reb held that piece of lead in his hand, rolling it gently in his palm. "An' you thought that Summers had been shot with Harvey Little's thirty-thirty," he said, half chidingly. "Look."

From his shell belt, Reb produced a cartridge and held it up beside the piece of lead. The lead of the cartridge was almost identical in size with the bullet that Reb held. That bullet was deformed about the tip, but its base was not battered.

"I pack a forty-five," Reb said gently. "That slug's from a forty-four-fourty. Who found that UMC shell, Mr. McAlpine?"

"Why, Wingate found it," McAlpine answered, surprised. "He—" The Triangle Dot owner stopped. His face darkened in a frown. "Wingate," he said slowly, "carries a forty-four-forty."

"You keep that slug, Doc," warned Reb, handing back the bullet to Higley. "It's evidence. Do you feel better about

signin' Little's bond now, Mr. McAlpine?"

McAlpine did not answer that question. He had turned and was striding toward the office door.

"Wait, Ian," Higley shrilled. "What's this all about?"

But McAlpine had gone through the door. Reb stopped in the entrance and turned. "We'll be back, Doc," he said casually. "Hang onto that slug." And then Reb Conyear too was gone.

He caught up with McAlpine before the irate ranchman reached Pry's. Putting a hand on McAlpine's arm, Reb warned him. "Don't talk too much here," he said. "Let's start for the ranch. That's the first thing."

McAlpine nodded shortly. "You go back with me," he said.

"Sure," agreed Reb.

At the store, McAlpine called Charlotte and Harvey. The two came out, wonderingly, but their questioning looks were not answered. McAlpine helped the girl into the buckboard and indicated Reb's bedroll, still lying on the store porch. "Put it in," he said.

Reb picked up the bedroll and tossed it into the buckboard. "I got a saddle at the barber shop, too," he announced. "Likely I'll need it."

"We'll get it," grated McAlpine. "Get in, you two."

"My saddle an' stuff is at the jail," reminded Harvey Little. "I—"

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"Darn it!" swore McAlpine. "I'll get that too. Will we never get out of this hole?"

The two stops to collect belongings did not take long, but McAlpine fumed with impatience. It was not until they were out of town and he had stopped his team that the ranchman cooled at all. When he had stopped the team he turned in his seat and held out his hand to Harvey Little, riding beside Reb in the back of the buckboard.

"I'm a fool, Harvey," said McAlpine. "I know that you didn't have a thing to do with shootin' Summers."

Little took the extended hand. "I'm sure glad you believe that, Mr. McAlpine," he said. "How—"

"Never mind," interrupted McAlpine. "Conyear'll tell you. We're goin' to the ranch now."

Little turned and looked at Reb. Charlotte McAlpine had her arms around her father's neck and was kissing his weathered cheek. McAlpine had started the team, but he didn't seem to mind the girl's exuberance. When Charlotte did free her arms, McAlpine held the reins in one hand. The other arm he put around his daughter's waist.

"Conyear?" said Harvey Little. "How come yo're Conyear?"

"I was born that way," said Reb. "Listen."

The buckboard rattled on and Reb talked to Harvey Little.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Go for Your Gun!

WHEN they reached the ranch, McAlpine stopped the team and went straight to the cookshack. The cook knew from the boss's manner that something was afoot, but could impart no information. He didn't know where the men had ridden that day. Mc-

Alpine ordered the cook to look after the buckboard team and, taking Harvey Little and Reb with him, went into the house and to his office. Charlotte had already joined her mother. The girl was apprehensive as to what was to come, but happy because Harvey was out and free and her father believed Harvey innocent.

In the office McAlpine turned to Reb Conyear. "What are you goin' to do now?" he inquired.

Reb frowned. "I'd sort of wanted to jump Wingate," he said, "but Wingate ain't here. I reckon I'll go to the hay-camp."

"It'll be late," warned McAlpine. "Why not wait till—"

"I been waiting," Reb said grimly. "I reckon I can finish my business at the camp pretty quick."

"What are you goin' to do there?" asked McAlpine.

"I'm goin' to jump Bill Walters," said Reb. "I'm goin' to tell him that I've found Andrews an' accuse him of killin' Wheat."

"And' then what?" McAlpine stared hard at Reb.

"Then I don't know what'll happen," said Reb, simply. "The way I figured it out, Bill started that run. He killed Wheat. But he come to camp after the run. That meant that there was men helpin'. I think that Pry was behind it. I—"

"By George!" exclaimed McAlpine. "I got a letter from Pueblo. I never opened it. Too excited, I guess. Wait!"

He produced an envelope from his coat pocket and tore it open. Scanning the sheet enclosed, he grunted and passed the missive across to Reb. Answering McAlpine's request, his friend in Pueblo had written that four hundred head of Cross In A Box steers had been sold in Pueblo two weeks before. The buyer of those steers, so the writer continued, said that he had contracted with Jake Pry for

some three hundred more steers to be delivered later in the year.

"There's my Pinetrees," Reb said grimly as he passed the letter back.

"An' there's three hundred Triangle Dots he contracted for," replied McAlpine.

"I reckon we might see Mr. Pry pretty soon," grated Reb. "First though, I aim to settle with Walters. I want to get Wheat's body taken care of an' I want to find out who was with Pry an' handled the cattle. I want a cleanup, McAlpine."

McAlpine frowned. "So do I," he agreed. "The trouble is, I don't know who I can trust now. Harvey here is all right, but Wingate I'd have bet on, an' Wingate is crooked. He killed Tobe Summers. I'd 've trusted Wingate with whatever I had. Now I don't know who to trust."

"There's Granny Block," suggested Reb.

McAlpine's face lighted. "Sure, there's Granny," he agreed.

There was a knock on the office door and Mrs. McAlpine's voice came. "I've brought a lunch for you men," she said. "You'd better eat!"

"We had better," agreed Reb, as McAlpine opened the door, "while we can."

There were sandwiches and pie on the tray that the gray-haired Martha McAlpine brought into the room. Behind her mother came Charlotte carrying the coffee-pot. The men ate and drank while the women hovered anxiously in the background. Mrs. McAlpine put her hand on her husband's shoulder and looked at Reb.

"Trouble, Ian?" she asked tremulously.

"Trouble, Martha."

Charlotte came to stand beside Harvey Little.

"Do you have to go, Ian?" asked Mrs. McAlpine. "Couldn't you send someone?"

"I've always killed my own snakes, Martha," said McAlpine.

Reb looked at the pie on his plate. There wasn't anybody to stand behind Reb Conyear. No one to worry about whether or not he went into trouble and came out of it. For an instant that bitter thought was in Reb's mind. Then suddenly he was glad that it was so. He looked up and smiled at the gray-haired woman, turned and included Charlotte in that smile.

"I wouldn't worry none if I was you," said Reb to the two women.

Martha McAlpine's eyes searched Reb's face. Gradually the worried expression she wore was supplanted by one of confidence. Charlotte, her hand on Harvey's shoulder, let a little breath of relief escape her lips.

"I'd like to go to the haycamp pretty quick," said Reb to McAlpine. "I'd like to start a wagon out of there to get—" the presence of the women caused him to refrain from mentioning Wheat Andrews' body—"well, I'd like to go," he finished lamely.

McAlpine wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "Let's go, then," he said.

There were horses in the corral at the Triangle Dot. The men roped out mounts and saddled. The two women had gone to the corrals with them, and when they mounted, Harvey Little rode close to Charlotte. Leaning down from the saddle he kissed the girl full on the lips. McAlpine did not frown and there was a look of contentment in Martha McAlpine's eyes.

"I'll be back tonight, Martha," said Ian McAlpine.

The three rode away, leaving the women standing beside the corral gate.

While it was some three hours past noon, the men did not hurry. There seemed to be something of a grim certainty in the way they rode. It was trot, walk, trot, and canter, covering the ground, going on inexorably—like death.

It seemed to Reb Conyear that he had done this before, again and yet again. McAlpine rode close to him and spoke.

"We might have brought a deputy with us," he said. "We might have—"

"Your deputy is Jake Pry's man," reminded Reb.

McAlpine looked at Reb's square-cut face. "An' you are your own authority," he said. "All right, Conyear."

"When we get to camp, you an' Harvey stay on your horses," ordered Reb. "There's one, mebbe two men there that might make a break for it. I don't want 'em to get away." He knew that if McAlpine and Little were mounted, they could not take part in what was sure to come. He knew that Bill Walters would not sit supine and submit to being taken. But Reb intended to be on the ground when he spoke to Walters. If Walters did submit, it would be all right. If Walters did not submit—Reb thought of Wheat Andrews—that would be all right too.

BUT the play did not come up as Reb had anticipated. When the three reached the haycamp, the place was deserted except for the cook, who crawled out from under the chuck wagon to greet them. The cook was sleepy-eyed and smelled of vanilla extract.

"Where's Block?" asked McAlpine, looking down at the cook.

"Out in the meadow," answered the cook. "You all goin' to stay for supper?" He was eyeing Reb, not sure that he had seen the rusty-haired rider before, but still half recognizing him.

"No," answered McAlpine. "Anybody been here today?"

The cook thought a moment. "Wingate was in at noon," he said. "He's went down to the Bend camp. Said he'd be back. That's all that's been here."

McAlpine looked at Reb, his eyebrows lifted.

"We'll go to the camp," said Reb quiet-

ly. "I reckon we'd better not try to take a wagon with us for Andrews. The horses ain't in."

McAlpine nodded. "Let's get goin' then," he said impatiently. "Tell Block we'll be back."

"You better stay to supper," the cook called after them.

The three left the camp and rode on toward the river. Again it was trot, walk, trot and canter, and then as they reached the hardpan they saw a rider coming toward them.

"Wingate," said Harvey Little harshly, and Reb saw the youngster loosen in its holster the six-shooter that he had borrowed at the ranch.

"Keep that thing covered up," said Reb forcefully.

Little looked at Reb, scowled, but removed his hand from the butt of the gun.

As the Triangle Dot foreman drew closer, Reb reined his horse a little to the right, so that a small space separated him from McAlpine and Little. The single man and the three drew closer and closer, and then, when Wingate saw who was approaching, he stopped his horse. The others rode up, still in their open formation, and stopped.

"Hello," said Wingate, addressing McAlpine, but looked at Harvey Little. "You lookin' for me?"

"I am!" snapped McAlpine. "I—"

"Easy!" warned Reb, noting the anger in McAlpine's voice. "Let me. Yeah, we were lookin' for you, Wingate."

Wingate looked at Reb, studying him.

"Yo're—" he began.

"I'm the fella that worked for the haycrew" said Reb. "Rusty you called me. I didn't take yore tip about goin' over to Pry's. Thanks just the same, but I'm a little too wise to be sent over to be killed."

Puzzlement wrote itself on Wingate's face. "Killed?" he echoed.

The look of puzzlement could not be

assumed. Reb, watching the Triangle Dot cowboss, was suddenly forced to revise his beliefs. His voice was less certain when he spoke again.

"You figgered on that, didn't you?" he demanded. "Pry wanted me over there where him or some of his men could take care of me. I wasn't fool enough to go."

"Pry?" said Wingate.

"Quit stallin'!" snapped McAlpine. "Wingate, we got the goods on you. You knowed Summers was a detective that I'd got in here. You killed him an' tried to plant the killin' on Harvey, here. I ought to let Harvey have you! I—"

"Wait!" ordered Reb. Wingate's face had turned white. His eyes were wide and round. There was a look of appeal on his face as he stared at Reb.

"Your rifle was in the haystack back at camp, Wingate," said Reb accusingly. "I seen you from the mesa when you got to Summers. I know that you was packin' a rifle when you come in. You carry a forty-four forty an' Summers was killed with a forty-four forty. You found that thirty-thirty UMC shell that you claimed was from Harvey's gun. Harvey's gun was gone, an' when him an' I got to his camp, there it was again. You killed Summers, Wingate, an' tried to plant it on Harvey. You can give up or go for your iron!"

Wingate seemed to slump. His face, white beneath its tan, took on the lines of age. His shoulders sagged. "I never killed Summers," he blurted. "I found him after he'd been shot."

"I saw that," said Reb grimly. "You found him after you'd shot him."

Wingate whimpered again. "I didn't kill him. I found him, I tell you! I'd taken Little's rifle. I was goin' to beef one or two cows an' hang it on him so McAlpine would fire him. Charlotte—"

"Keep her out of this!" snapped Harvey Little. "Your tongue ain't fit to speak of her."

"I got Whitey to bring my gun in when he come to the ranch," Wingate finished weakly. "He'd wanted to work for me, punchin', an' I got him to do it. I put Harvey's rifle back in the camp—"

Reb looked at McAlpine. "I reckon that's the truth," he said slowly. "What about it, McAlpine?"

McAlpine was looking at the horn of



HARVEY LITTLE

his saddle, his face a study. Slowly he lifted his head and turned to Harvey Little. "It's up to you, Harvey," said Ian McAlpine.

Harvey Little kept his eyes on Wingate. His hand was again on the butt of his gun, clutching it. Slowly his hand relaxed.

"I reckon," said Harvey Little, fighting the words out, "that I don't want him."

CHAPTER NINE

Showdown

REB CONYEAR let go the breath he held. Harvey Little had been for a moment in the position of both judge and executioner, and Harvey Little had come through.

McAlpine let the words come slowly from his lips. "You get off the place, Wingate," he said. "Don't go to the ranch; don't go near it. Pull out. Your gear will be taken to Trinchera. You can get it there an' I'll expect to find that horse in town. Get out an' don't come back—an' get out now!" The ranch owner's face was stony.

Sudden relief flooded Wingate's face. His shoulders almost squared, his head came up a little. He opened his mouth to speak, but Reb Conyear forestalled that.

"Shut up," snapped Reb. "Git goin' an' thank your stars you're a lucky dang fool!"

Wingate glanced from Reb to the others, then lifted his reins. His horse stepped forward, and suddenly Wingate thrust in his spurs and the horse leaped ahead. As Reb and the other two turned, Wingate bent forward in the saddle, like a man who seeks to escape pursuing lead, and with the horse running full out, swept across the hardpan.

When he was gone there was silence among the three, then Reb, looking at Harvey Little, spoke slowly. "I reckon you're fit for that girl, Harvey," said Reb gently, and he spurred his horse.

They rode back toward the haycamp. Reb's mind was busy. If Herb Wingate had not killed Summers, and Reb was convinced that he had not killed Summers, then who was guilty? There was no answer to that.

McAlpine voiced the problem. "Wingate didn't do it," said McAlpine with conviction. "Who did?"

"A Cross In A Box brand," mused Reb, half aloud.

McAlpine caught the implication. "Pry, damn him!" swore McAlpine.

When the trio sighted the haycamp, they saw activity. Men were pulling in from the meadow, bringing their teams. The fat, squat figure of Granny Block was by the fire and Granny was talking, looking up at two men who sat in a buckboard.

"Pry," McAlpine said again. "That's him!"

"His deputy's with him," said Reb slowly, for Scott Davis sat beside Pry in the buckboard seat. "Who's that in the back?"

"Blackie!" snapped Harvey.

"Sure enough," agreed Reb. "McAlpine, let me do the talkin'. You'll spill things if you do it. You're mad."

"I'll talk to him," vowed McAlpine. "He's—"

"He's stole Pinetree cattle an' he's the man that had Wheat killed." Reb's voice was hard. "Do I talk or do I ride in an' take to shootin'? Which, McAlpine?"

"You can talk," grunted McAlpine, repressing his wrath. "But I think—"

"Let me talk then," snapped Reb.

But Granny Block did the talking when the three arrived. McAlpine had no time to dismount before Granny was at his stirrup. "Jake Pry has come over to take some of my men," announced Granny, looking up at McAlpine. "I'll never get this hay cut, Ian, what with men leavin' an' me havin' to fire—"

Granny caught sight of Reb. There was no hesitancy in his recognition. He broke off his complaint to McAlpine. "I knowed you was a rider," said Block. "I knowed it."

Reb Conyear dismounted. He was almost at the fire. His horse stood behind him and Reb moved his left hand and the horse stepped away. To Reb's right was the buckboard with Jake Pry and Scott

Davis and Blackie Cook. Blackie had risen.

To Reb's left were Bill Walters and Tom Dally. Walters had his hand in the bib of his overalls and there was a gun in that hand. Talk about sitting on a powder keg! Reb knew that he was on one and that a match had been lit.

But from the corner of his eyes Reb saw that Harvey Little had almost dismounted and stepped away. Harvey was now clear of the buckboard and on the other side, and Reb Conyear thanked his lucky stars that Harvey Little was no fool. The kid was coming through in a tight. Mentally Reb decided that Little would do to take along. McAlpine, on his horse, was out of the picture, but Granny Block had sensed that something was wrong, had felt the tension, and had stepped back so that he too was clear of Reb. To right and left the hay hands their teams-neglected, were gathered, and they too watched the stage so carefully set.

For a minute or two no one moved or spoke. Each man held his position as if a sudden command had halted him, waiting while the tension increased. Then Reb began to talk.

"I wouldn't worry about losin' men, Granny," said Reb carefully. "It can't be helped. You're bound to lose some once in a while. Just like a trail herd is bound to lose steers once in a while."

"What?" asked Granny.

Reb looked at Walters. "I found Wheat, Bill," Reb said slowly, almost casually. "Found him just where you'd left him. You got your gun back out of my bedroll, didn't you?"

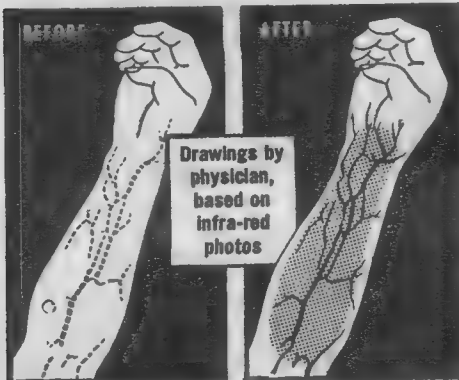
It was an invitation. Bill Walters recognized it as such but Bill Walters did not want to accept that invitation. Bill Walters wanted to live a while longer and he was afraid.

Reb waited. When Walters did not move, he spoke again. This time to Jake Pry.

"Them Pinetree steers you sold in Pueblo, Pry," he said. "Did you get a price for 'em? Hi Metcalf will want to know."

It seemed to Bill Walters, in that instant, that Reb had taken his eyes from him. It seemed to Bill Walters that this was the chance he wanted. Here were Jake Pry and Blackie Cook and Tom Dally, all on his side. Here was the law in the person of Scott Davis, and the law was also on his side. Bill Walters brought his hand from the bib of his overalls and there was a gun in that hand, Bill Walters' own .41 Colt.

But Bill Walters had been mistaken. Reb stepped back a little as Walters moved, and as he stepped back he dropped his hand in a short arc. Both guns roared, and while Reb Conyear staggered from the slug that brushed through his coat



HOW SLOAN'S LINIMENT AID'S MUSCULAR PAINS

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sleeve and grazed his arm, Bill Walters stood erect with surprise on his face and then pitched down.

He twitched, then lay still.

A voice, Granny Block's voice, called sharply, "Stop it, Dally!"

REB had no time to look at Dally. He had seen Jake Pry drop the lines to the buckboard's team and he had seen Blackie Cook drop back into the bed of the buckboard. As he dropped the lines, Pry had stooped, and the twin muzzles of a shotgun now appeared. Reb Conyear, coolly as though shooting at a target, sent slugs whistling into the dash of the buckboard.

The shotgun barrels tilted up and one discharged, belching lead against the sky. Then the barrels fell. Scott Davis, face ashen, sat on the seat of the buckboard and lifted his hands high, reaching up as though he could not get them high enough, and Harvey Little was walking toward the rear of the buckboard, the gun in his hand sending up a little trail of smoke.

"That's right," said Granny Block's voice. "Reach, Dally!"

And then the hay hands were crowding in and McAlpine, a mixture of awe and force in his voice, was ordering them back, and Reb Conyear was standing over Bill Walters, looking down at the man he had killed.

As he stared at the white face, Reb was conscious that his hate for Walters had gone now. There was no feeling in him except relief. His job was finished.

It took some time to get things sorted out. Blackie Cook was dead in the back of the buckboard. There was a forty-four forty rifle in Blackie's hands, but only two shells were discharged. Blackie had made the mistake of shooting at Reb Conyear while Harvey Little was shooting at him. Blackie would make no more mistakes. Harvey Little held the rifle up to view.

"Forty-four forty," said Harvey. "Here's the man that killed Summers, I reckon."

Jake Pry had dropped the shotgun and was lying across Scott Davis' feet. Jake Pry would see no more steers that year. Jake Pry would never plan again to sell steers or to run them over the *malpais* and down across the hardpan to the river. Tom Dally held his hands high, as did Scott Davis, and both were white for they had come through death and were still alive. Such experiences shake a man, however hard, and Scott Davis and Tom Dally were willing to talk. Indeed they concurred and amplified Reb Conyear's explanation—the explanation he gave to Granny Block and the hay hands gathered about.

And while the two prisoners talked, old Granny Block kept staring at Reb Conyear and nodding as if he had expected all this would happen.

Scott Davis and Tom Dally had been with Pry and Blackie Cook the night the Pinetree steers had run. They had helped Bill Walters bury Wheat Andrews on the sandbar.

"He oughtn't to've killed Wheat," Davis wailed. "There wasn't no sense in killing him. Pry said so. Pry had it all framed with Walters to run the cattle. It was the Cross In A Box brand that put the business into his head. He seen where he could blot the Pinetree brand, an' he seen where he could change the Triangle Dot. He had it all planned so we could make our killing at get away."

Reb had been right, too, as to the method of running off the cattle, Davis and Dally agreed. They also told of how Jake Pry had held the steers in a *rincon* mesa on his own ranch and how the brands had been altered before the cattle were sold. And Blackie Cook had killed Summers. Pry had ordered it when he had learned that Summers was a stock detective and had seen Summers on his side

of the river. A nice, tight little corporation it had been with Pry, a respectable merchant and ranchman, at its head, and Walters, Dally, Blackie Cook and Davis to do the dirty work.

"If he hadn't been so sly we'd have made it," said Scott Davis bitterly. "Havin' Blackie get on with the Triangle Dot to see where the cattle were placed, an' putting Walters an' Dally in here with the granger wagon was what upset things."

And so, when the story had been told, bodies were loaded into a wagon and Granny Block dispatched another wagon and two men to the *malpais* for Wheat Andrews' body, and the cook swore because his steak was burned, and the men, talking still and excited, drifted away toward the fire. Dally and Davis were bound and placed in the wagon with the bodies of those others, while Granny Block, on the seat beside the driver, watched his prisoners on their trip to the ranch.

Then it was that Harvey Little bound Reb's arm with a clean white handkerchief and the three men mounted to ride back to the Triangle Dot.

Late that night, at the headquarters ranch, Reb Conyear wrote two letters. Both letters were to Hi Metcalf and both were identical, but one was addressed to the Alps Hotel in Denver, and the other to the Pinetree Ranch at San Angelo.

Dear Mr. Metcalf:

I have found Wheat Andrews and he will be buried here in his country. Bill Walters killed him the night the herd ran. Bill Walters is going to be buried up here, too. You will have to collect off the estate of a man named Jake Pry for the steers.

He sold them as Cross In A Box cattle in Pueblo. Mr. McAlpine of the Triangle Dot ranch here, near Trinchera, will help you. I hope you won't have no trouble.

As you will have to collect for the steers, I don't know if you will want to give me that two dollars a head or not, but that will be all right, as I am leaving here for San Angelo in about a week and we can talk it over then. I am having to stay here for a week at least because they say they can't get ready for the wedding in less time than that and I am going to be best man, and I have got to stay for the inquests too.

Hoping that you don't have no trouble about the steers, I am.

Yrs. truly,
Reb Conyear.

Carrying his literary masterpieces, Reb went from McAlpine's office and to the porch. Down at the bunkhouse there were lights where the Triangle Dot riders and Granny Block sat as guards upon Scott Davis and Tom Dally. There were no lights in the old bunkhouse, but it was occupied. There were four bodies there. Wheat Andrews lay beside the men that had killed him.

On one end of the porch, a cigar tip glowed. Ian McAlpine sat there with his arm about his wife. There was no light on the other end of the porch, but little sounds came to Reb. Small, soft sounds as of a kiss given and returned.

Reb Conyear, grinning a little, put the letters he had written into his hip pocket. Very silently he turned and walked back into the house. Seated once more in McAlpine's office Reb reopened his two letters, unfolded them and picked up his pencil. He sucked the pencil thoughtfully for a moment, and then, the grin broadening, added a postscript.

P.S. It looks like I might be able to get away a little quicker.

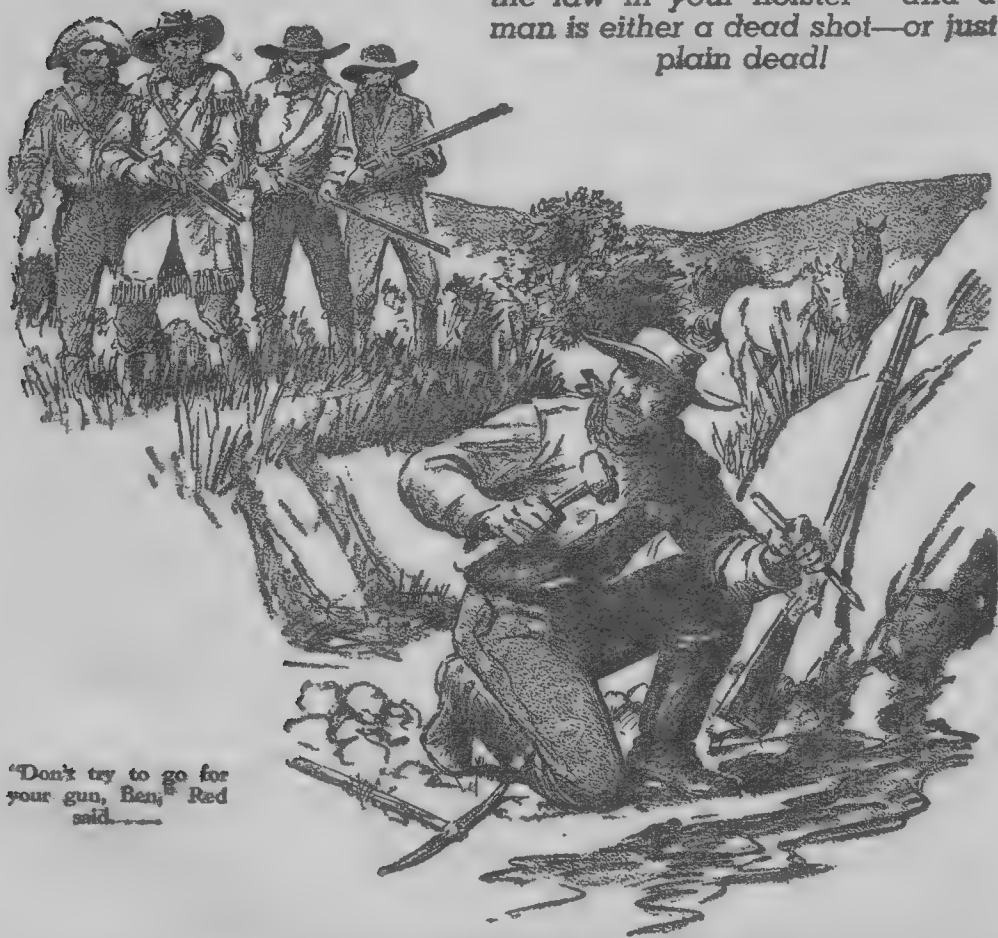
PROBABLY the most unbeatable method of foiling highwaymen was cooked up by a California silver shipper, who melted his shipment into nearly half-ton ingots—too heavy for robbers to cart away ahead of a fast-moving posse!

—Jim Vance.

DEAD WRONG

By Jim Kielgaard

*Out past the rim of hell, where
the trail wolves ride, you carry
the law in your holster — and a
man is either a dead shot — or just
plain dead!*



"Don't try to go for
your gun, Ben," Red
said.

BEN EGAN, on a month's leave from the army post, was riding West because back East his sister needed money. But the Kid was riding for adventure and romance.

The Kid rode happily, eagerly as he always did. There wasn't, as far as Ben knew, any romance in the West. There

was a lot of dirty work, sweat, and hardship.

But the Kid was blessed with an imagination that reversed things for him. He had come West for adventure, and he found it regardless of what he did. He

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was finding it now, his mind's eye picturing Indians behind every dip and hollow and himself as the dashing hero who was fighting them off.

Then, tiring of his games, the Kid reined his horse in beside Ben's and plodded silently for fifteen minutes. But it just wasn't in the kid to plod for more than fifteen minutes.

"Say!" he exploded suddenly. "Do you know this is the first time we been out with pack horses?"

"Reckon it is, Kid," Ben said mildly. "We didn't take none along when we was huntin' Sioux, did we?"

"Well, we couldn't hardly," the Kid pointed out. "The Sioux might of stole them."

"That's right," Ben agreed. "An' there's also a little matter of four or six horses bein' a couple of dozen times as hard to ride as two."

"Oh yes," the Kid said carelessly. "Say, Ben, how do you make a pack horse pack?"

Ben pondered. There were a lot of simple little things he had always accepted as a matter of course, and he never thought of the hows and whys until the Kid mentioned them.

"I dunno exactly," he confessed. "You just pack the hoss up an' haze him wherever you want him to go."

"Does he always go?"

"Not allus. Some settles right down to work, some you got to give time, an' some never get used to the idea they got to carry their share. Take that black an' white colt now. I made him a special harness with pouches to pack his gear in. He knows damn well what the harness is on for, but he hauls off an' goes wild the minute you tries to put somethin' in it. He's one of them as might never learn to take a pack."

"You mean he ain't broke?" the Kid's eyes shone. "I never broke a pack horse."

"He's broke all right," Ben said nastily.

"Don't monkey around him, Kid. He's downright mean when he wants to be."

That night they made camp on the banks of a winding little stream that came down from the hills. Camp made, Ben picked up his rifle.

"Guess I'll amble around for some fresh meat," he said. "Don't stray from camp, Kid."

Ben followed the stream up—animals should be coming down to drink now. He saw a bull elk, but that was more meat than he wanted and there was no use wasting any. A mile farther up, three deer stood in a line dipping their muzzles in the water. Ben shot. A yearling buck dropped.

He dressed the buck out, hoisted it to his shoulders, and started back down the stream. He was still a half mile away from camp when the air was split by the scream of an enraged horse. Ben hurried and looked around a bend at the camp.

The Kid had a hackamore hitch on the black and white colt. Pots, pans and blankets he had tried to make the colt pack were scattered about. The colt reared, and struck with his front hoofs as he screamed again. The Kid was clinging to the very end of a thirty-foot rope and trying to bring him down.

Ben strode into the camp and dropped the buck. Taking the rope from the Kid, he worked along it to the enraged horse. He counted to ten. By all rights he should get mad now, but long ago he had learned that it was futile to get mad at the Kid. The horse shivering but quiet, Ben turned to the Kid.

"What did you think you was doin'?" he asked.

"Going to make him pack!" the Kid panted.

The next day they rode on through country that two years before Ben wouldn't have crossed except on foot by night. But the Indians were not much of a bother now; the warring tribes had been

pushed back, and all that was necessary was to slip around an occasional band of hunters.

Still, Ben kept his rifle close and his eyes open. There were plain traces of white men who had been here before him, and a white man could think up more devilment in three minutes than an Indian could in three weeks.

Besides, there was the Kid and the colt to watch. Somehow, the Kid had conceived the notion that he was Heaven-sent to teach the colt how to pack. Twice in the following two days as they rode west, Ben had to rescue the Kid and the colt from each other. The Kid's efforts to make the colt pack were also making him fractious. Three or four times a day he tried to buck his harness off.

The evening of the third day they rode into a valley and pushed through the trees to a grassy little meadow.

Ben halted as the four pack horses crowded into the meadow and began to crop at the shoulder-high grass. Directly across, the hill ascended vertically for twenty feet and leveled off into a wide bench. There was a black hole in the face of the bank where an icy spring—starting four feet underground—had washed the earth away and formed a little pool that sent its surplus waters trickling down the valley.

Ben took the packs from the horses. The colt—who hadn't been amiably inclined toward human relations since the Kid's efforts to make him carry something—had the pack harness stripped from his back and a bell hung around his neck. They could locate him by the bell if he decided to quit the rest of the bunch.

At the spring Ben reached far in to bring forth a stone half the size of a hen's egg. He balanced it in his hand, his mind on that day, five years ago, when he and Charley Pendennis had camped in this meadow and found the gold in the spring.

Charley had been killed by a Sioux

lancer the next day. For the following four years the country had not been safe for any white man who might have to stay and work a few days.

But Ben was glad he had not come back for the gold. His sister needed it now, and he himself didn't know what gold would buy him that he did not have already. The Kid walked over and stood beside him. Ben held the stone out.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked.

The Kid took it, turned it over, and handed it back.

"I don't know. It's heavy."

"Gold," Ben said.

"Well, now—" The Kid hesitated.

"Well, now. That's real nice. I'm glad you found it, Ben."

"It's half yours."

The Kid shook his head.

"Oh no, Ben. I don't want it. You keep it yourself. My grandfather left me more money than I'll ever need. It's in a New York bank. I get it when I'm twenty-one."

For a moment Ben stared, puzzled. The Kid was vastly interested in jackrabbits, Indians, coyotes, pack horses, and sixteen dozen other commonplace things. But a gold mine didn't even ruffle his hair.

WHILE the Kid slept heavily that night, Ben lay awake thinking.

It seemed less than thirty years ago, when he had been twenty-one, that he had waved goodbye to his mother and sister on the porch of their Pennsylvania farm home.

The events were so vividly recreated for Ben now that he thought of it as only yesterday.

The farm had not been a rich one, but by no means was it poverty stricken. Ben might have done all right there if he had stayed. But Ben, when young, had dreamed of great success and wealth.

At fifty-one he was anything but a success and certainly he was not rich. All the

goods he owned in the world he could carry on one horse if necessary. His home was wherever he happened to toss his blanket down, and at the end his grave would be a nameless and forgotten one.

He hadn't written anything about that back to Pennsylvania. His mother had died happy in the belief that he had achieved everything he had set out to achieve, and that he was prosperous.

His sister still believed it. She had married, and at forty-two was the widowed mother of two half-grown girls. When his mother had died, she had become the one gentle influence in his life.

Ben had never returned East, and now hadn't the slightest desire to do so, but he had corresponded with his sister regularly. It was she who had written him the little begging letter asking if he could spare three hundred dollars as a loan so she could open a store in the small town near her husband's farm. She had to live, she had written, and farm work was too much for her.

Well, there was probably four or five thousand dollars' worth of gold in the spring. She could have it all.

But lying there, Ben could not admit himself as much of a failure as his sister would probably consider him if she knew his true circumstances. His life had been a full one, even though he had nothing to show for it. He felt vaguely that he had been and still was a part of something much greater than himself or any one individual.

He had lived in the saddle and would probably die in the saddle. But he had helped push back a savage frontier so that millions of his fellow men could find new hope, new life, and new homes in the country he had helped to conquer. There was still much to be done and he could help do it. But already he had given much.

It was nearly dawn when Ben finally slept.

When the Kid woke up, Ben was already at the spring. He had brought along a small pick, hammer and drill and was chipping the rock away. The gold in the spring was only a pocket or bench placer washed there by the forgotten river that had carved the valley, and it was now impressed in lava rock.

He piled the chunks of gold-bearing ore a little to one side of the spring—he would pack it out on the horses, pulverize it, and wash the gold out with quicksilver. Spread on a clean bandanna on the ground were a few small nuggets of free gold. Ben kept them separate. He would carry the nuggets in his pocket because they might get lost on the horses.

The Kid looked on with indifferent interest for awhile, then he strolled restlessly about the meadow looking at elk tracks. Ben stopped digging to watch him. Ben wouldn't have worried about an ordinary person out here where there was no trouble to get into, but the Kid was far from an ordinary person.

"What you aimin' to do?" Ben called.

The Kid shrugged. "I think I'll take my gun and mog around a bit."

"Can you find your bearin's back here?"

"Sure," the Kid sniffed. "Ain't I hunted Indians?"

Ben went back to his digging. If the Kid got lost, Ben would just have to take a couple of hours off and hunt him up.

His gun ready, walking on tiptoes and skulking from tree to tree in the approved manner of scouts, the Kid climbed the hill.

For two hours he wandered about on top, and spent another hour making an elaborate stalk of a black bear that turned out to be a black squirrel. The Kid watched him scamper up a tree and disappear behind a big knot on the trunk.

For awhile he sat with his gun across his knees, wishing a couple of Indians would show up and start a little excitement. Finally, bored with inaction, he got up and started north along the rim

of the hill. He had traveled about five miles more when he smelled wood smoke.

The Kid slipped behind a tree. Tensely excited, he peered around the trunk in the direction from which the smell came. There was certainly someone near, probably Indians. They might be hostile—he hoped.

After a bit he made a short run to another tree and slunk behind it quivering with joy. This was life, this was real, this was the way frontiersmen should spend their time. When he told Ben how he had slipped up and surprised a bunch of warring Sioux, he guessed Ben would see how much he had learned.

The Kid dropped to his belly and wormed through the brush. He kept his face toward the smoke.

Then a rifle muzzle was thrust into the small of his back and a calm voice drawled,

"Was you goin' someplace, brother?"

The Kid stopped, startled, and looked back over his shoulder. A tall man with long black hair stood behind him, holding the rifle on his back. The Kid stood up.

"Shucks," he said foolishly. "I thought you was Sioux."

The tall man's eyes roved the Kid from head to foot, and stopped on his chubby, babyish face. His eyes twinkled a bit, but the Kid missed that.

"I presoom you'd be an Injun scout?" the man drawled.

"Yes," the Kid said. "Me and my partner's making a little whirl into the hills."

"Well," the tall man took the rifle away, "I guess we ain't in no danger, now that you know we're friendly. We're sort of out here doin' the same thing. Come up an' get acquainted."

THE KID followed the tall man to a lean-to camp that had a fire burning beside it. Four horses were picketed a little piece away, and three men—two resembling the first, and the

third half lost in a flowing red beard—sprawled about.

Suspended over the fire on a buckskin thong, a haunch of venison was cooking. The tall man threw himself down beside the other three.

"This here's an Injun hunter," he announced. "Him an' his partner's rammin' around the hills."

Redbeard examined the Kid with one swift glance, and lay back down again.

"Who's your partner?" he asked.

"Ben Egan."

Redbeard jerked back up. "Did you say Ben Egan?"

"Yeh," the Kid said carelessly. "He found a gold mine in a spring, and he's digging on it now."

The four men stared at the sky, or into the woods. The Kid lay on his back, his eyes half closed, not noticing or caring about the sudden tense interest that gripped all four of them.

"Did you say a gold mine?" Redbeard asked.

"Yeh."

Redbeard cleared his throat. "Well now, that's downright lucky. Where is it?"

The Kid waved a careless hand. "Follow this ridge five miles south, cut west, and follow the gully down. You'll come to a meadow, and the mine's in a spring there."

"Well!" Redbeard gulped. "Darned if that ain't lucky."

"I suppose so," the Kid said. "Well, I guess I'll be getting back."

"Wait—"

One of the men rose to his feet, but Redbeard drew him back down. They watched the Kid's retreating form.

"Why'd you let him go, Red?" the man who had started to speak complained. "He'll go tell his partner he seen us, an' his partner can't be as muddleheaded as that kid."

"Do you know Ben Egan?" Redbeard asked.

"No."

"Well I do. If we plugged the kid, he'd be on our tails before mornin' an' I'd just as soon have all the devils in tarnation there. If we plug Egan we'd best hit for Canada, because every scout an' half the soldiers on the border'll be after our scalps. We'll plug 'em both if we have to, but first let's see if there ain't another way."

BEN Egan was worried. Not that he had anything definite to worry about, but there was a vague hint of something not as it should be. A half dozen times during the day he left the spring to look around. Nothing showed, but there still persisted a slight anxiety.

The gold in the spring was mostly in the rock, but so heavily impregnated through it that the rock itself would yield at least one or two ounces of gold to the pound. Only occasionally did Ben find a free nugget that he could pry out with his knife and place in the bandanna.

When twilight fell, he had about an ounce and a half of free gold and a great heap of gold ore beside the spring.

And with the night, the Kid came back.

Ben saw him even before he broke from the line of trees into the meadow, and sighed in relief. Ben just didn't like this place. When things were so ominously quiet, an explosion could be expected to

follow. The colt threw his head up and looked nervous when the Kid came down.

"What'd you find?" Ben asked.

The Kid sank wearily down by the fire. "Nothing much. Ben, how much longer will you be?"

"Three days," Ben guessed.

"I guess that'll be all right," the Kid conceded. "Then maybe we can go some place where there's Indians. I smelled smoke today, and crawled up on a fire. There was four white men in a camp."

"What'd they look like?" Ben snapped.

The Kid described them. Ben listened intently, but betrayed nothing of what he felt. Red Iger, whom the description of Redbeard fitted perfectly, was a squawman and renegade who had led more than one Indian raid and plundered more than one wagon train.

Did you tell them anything?"

"Naw."

"Didn't you even say a word about me?" Ben pressed.

"I told 'em you found a gold mine."

Ben groaned inwardly. Red Iger in the same country was a menace. Red Iger in the same country with another man's gold mine meant certain trouble.

He had found the mine. He could shoot as straight and as fast as Red. He would try to keep the mine.

"You better turn in," he told the Kid.

"I want you to help me tomorrow."

With the Kid wrapped in his blankets,

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Ben went to the spring. The gold-bearing ore was all within six inches of bed-rock, and Ben had already chipped off nearly a quarter of what was in the spring. With the pick he broke off chunks of the non-bearing rock and laid it on top of the gold ore.

If Red Iger and the men with him got the mine, they would expect some gold. But, if they picked up a bit of chipped rock that obviously had no gold in it, they were likely to discard the whole pile.

The next day, Ben set the Kid to taking out the gold-bearing rock and piling it on top of what Ben had already removed. Ben lay at the edge of the forest, his rifle ready.

At nightfall, Ben went to the spring to find the Kid with a great pile of ore and another ounce of gold. Wanting to go on, the Kid had worked hard.

And the next day, as before, the Kid worked while Ben watched. When Ben came in at night, the Kid had dug far back in the bank. He had about two ounces more of free gold and, clear to the back of the spring, had uncovered a gold vein a half inch wide by three inches long. Ben pried a bit out, and came to solid rock.

Tomorrow morning they could take out the three-inch vein and be on the move. What would be left after that would scarcely repay a man for the labor involved in getting it. When the Kid slept, Ben again went to the spring and covered the gold ore with barren rock.

THE following morning, Ben awoke early, looked out on the meadow, and swore. The two saddle mounts and three of the pack horses still grazed there, but there was no trace of the colt. As if he had known that today he must carry the hated pack, the colt was gone. Ben shook the Kid, who got up blinking.

"You wanta hunt up that colt?"

"Sure," the Kid said, trying to look like a born horse wrangler. "I'll find him."

Ben watched him go and returned to the spring. He leaned his rifle where he could reach it quickly and began to take out the last of the gold.

But the Kid was scarcely out of sight when a cool voice drawled, "Aw right, Ben. Stay real still. An' don't even look like you was goin' to pick that gun up."

Ben squatted where he was for a second. It seldom paid to make a break for a gun when the man behind you already had the drop. Slowly he turned around.

"Hello, Red," he said coolly.

"Hello, Ben," Red Iger replied. "Do you aim to act sensible?"

Ben writhed, but strove to keep calm. Losing the gold would come hard, but worse, the Kid was out hunting the colt and would walk right into this.

Ben said, "Red, I got a partner in here with me."

"Yeh. The Injun hunter. I met him. I guess mebbe you'd like to ride back to the army camp with him, Ben?"

"Guess mebbe I would," Ben admitted.

"It would be a heap easier to settle ever'thin' with a couple of bullets," Red Iger meditated.

"You could settle it thataway," Ben admitted. "But that Kid ain't twenty yet, Red. An' he's dumber'n a porcupine. You wouldn't get no good out of killin' him, an' you know yourself that, if you kill me, Joe Dreese, or Ike Random, or Dave Bisleigh or somebody else'll get you. There's other ways."

"What's your ideas on the subject?"

His face composed and thoughtful, Ben said slowly, "Just this, Red. Turn the Kid an' me loose with our gear, an' you get what's here with no more comeback from anybody."

"How do we know—" one of the others started.

Red Iger motioned him to silence. Ben Egan was a terrible enemy to have on the loose, but never once had he broken his given word.

"Where's the Kid?" Red asked.

"Out huntin' a stray hoss. He'll bring it back here."

Red Iger stroked his beard. Then, "If I turn you loose you'll beat it? You won't come back here tryin' to get a pot-shot around the diggin's?"

Ben looked at him frankly. "Red, I won't promise never to draw a bead on you if we meet again. But I will promise that, if you'll let the Kid go, him an' me'll clear out of here with no ructions."

"That's fair enough," Red admitted. "How much gold you got? We'll take that, too."

Ben indicated the bandanna, and drew a deep breath.

"We got only four ounces," he said. "But we just now uncovered the big vein."

Red Iger's eyes narrowed. "I wouldn't doubt you," he said softly, "but accordin' to what that kid told us, you been workin' here anyways three days. We'll have a look around."

Ben shrugged. "Go ahead, but there ain't no more gold. I found a couple of nuggets in the spring, an' dug back to see if I could find the vein. I dunno what the Kid told you, but he don't know any more about gold than a horse does about college."

Red Iger kept his rifle trained on Ben while the three went through the packs and bedding piece by piece. They looked in the saddlebags, searched Ben's pockets, and one of them strode over to kick the rock pile apart. He bent to pick up three chunks of rock and examined them carefully. Then he turned to Red.

"Aw right, Ben," Red Iger said. "You're goin' East when you go. Leave your rifle here, take your hosses an' camp gear, an' go down this valley one hour. We'll haze the kid after you when he comes in. If you try to come back, there won't neither of you get a second chanst."

Ben gathered in the three pack horses and the saddle mounts. He packed them,

leaving the colt's pack harness where it was.

"I'd thank you for drapin' that around the colt when the Kid brings him in," he said.

Red Iger nodded silent agreement.

Ben traveled an hour down the valley, picketed the horses, and sat under a tree. He didn't look around, but suspected that one of Red Iger's men had followed him.

For another hour he sat, then got up and began to pace restlessly back and forth. The Kid, whose blundering had spoiled everything, was responsible for losing the gold. But even now Ben couldn't be mad at him. He began to peer back up the valley, a savage little anger gnawing at his vitals. If Red Iger didn't keep his promise and turn the Kid loose—

But there had been no shots yet.

Again Ben sat under the tree, his hat over his eyes. He felt hopeless, bitter.

He was aroused by a happy shout from the Kid.

"Hey, Ben! Looky!"

Ben sprang to his feet, looked up the valley, and gasped. The Kid was coming, leading the colt. The pouches on the colt's pack harness bulged, but he wasn't bucking.

Ben ran up. The colt wasn't bucking because it took all the effort he could muster just to walk. There was an enormous weight on his back.

"I knew I could make him pack!" the Kid bubbled gleefully. "The men at the mine told me when I brought the colt in how you sold them the mine and the rifles and would be waiting here—say, Ben, what'd you sell the rifles for?"

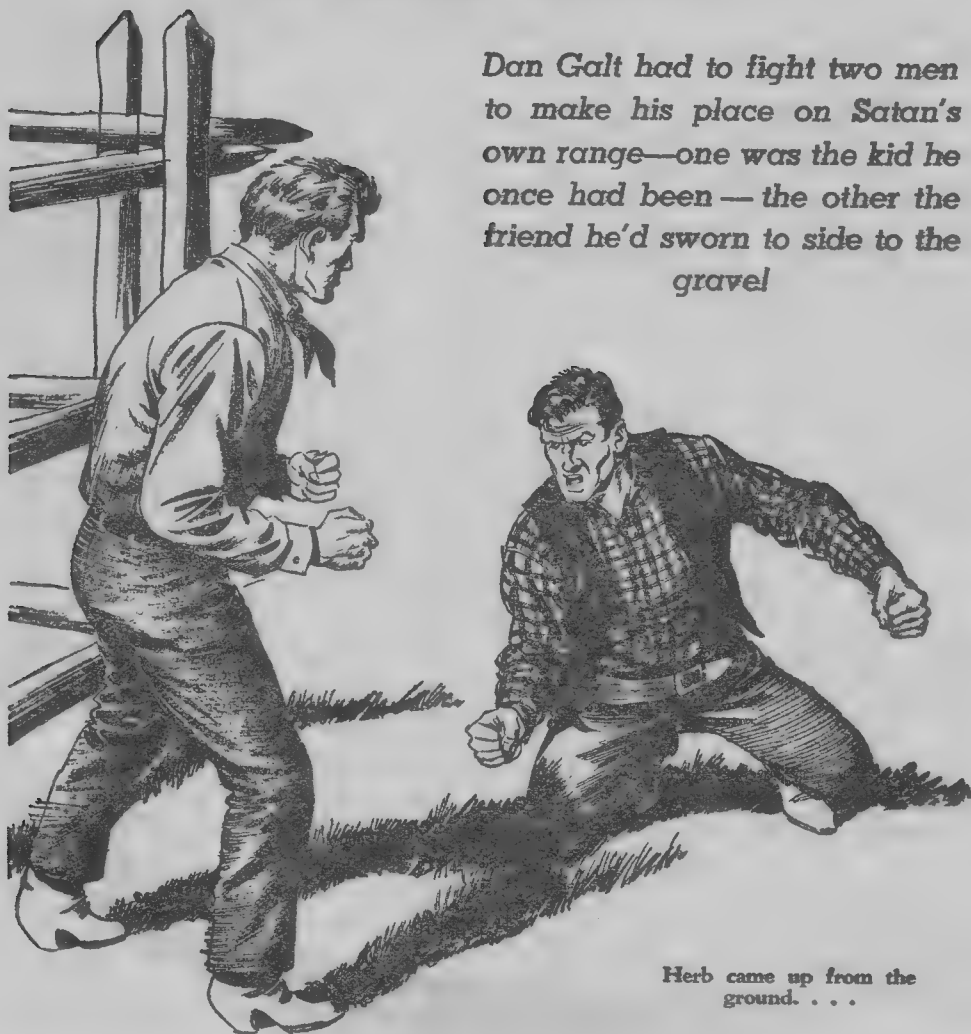
"But the colt started to act up when they tried to put the harness on. They got it on, but I knew I'd never get him down here alone. So the men held him while I loaded him up with all that rock we took out of the spring.

"He come then! You can just bet he come then!" the Kid said.

A BULLET IS MY HERITAGE

By George Michener

Dan Galt had to fight two men to make his place on Satan's own range—one was the kid he once had been—the other the friend he'd sworn to side to the gravel



Herb came up from the ground. . . .

THERE would be a dance in Minter this Saturday night, and Herb Catlin stopped by to borrow Whitefoot and Dan Galt's buggy. Dan Galt was fencing the stack of winter feed behind his barn, and he moved from post to post,

his big body bent over slightly, stapling the taut wire with short, banging strokes of the heavy fence pliers.

Herb Catlin, assured of the buggy and

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lazy in the morning sunshine, leaned against the barn to watch him, cigarette smoke dribbling across his eyes and humor quirking at his lips.

There was no malice in Herb Catlin, but he always had had the knack of finding amusement in the efforts of others. Dan Galt was thinking this as he drove the last staple and stuffed the pliers in his pocket. He unhooked the wire-stretchers, slung the tackle over his stocky shoulder, and turned toward Catlin, his broad young face troubled. It was going to be hard to speak what he had in mind.

Herb Catlin had returned two months back, and already his features had taken on a tan. He was twenty-seven, four years older than Galt, and with his lean rider's body and dark eyes he made a fine, reckless figure. Now, studying him, Dan Galt felt a faint resentment that the past three years had left so little of their mark upon the man.

Herb Catlin cuffed his hat to one side and grinned. "The ant," he drawled, "is an industrious beastie."

Herb's grin was infectious, and instantly Dan Galt was ashamed of his thoughts. "Derned grasshopper," he grumbled.

Catlin chanted, "I fiddle and dance from morn till night, for I'm only young once. Tra-la, tra-la." He flipped away his cigarette and straightened. "Kid, why not come along tonight? You keep sodbustin' around here and never seein' anybody, and you'll be talkin' to yourself like old Anton Nulak. Three's no crowd when it's you. You used to be kind of sweet on Mary yourself once. Remember?"

"Yeah," said Galt. "I remember." He hunched his broad shoulders a little.

Catlin followed Galt's gaze to where the cigarette smoldered in dry manure, and he scuffed it out with his toe. He kept his head down and said reflectively, "Mary's older now. You both are. We get over that kid stuff when we get older."

"Yeah," Galt agreed, "I guess that's right."

Catlin looked up. "I was wonderin', kid. I wasn't sure. I wouldn't want to be stepping on any toes."

Galt silently shook his head. He moved toward the corral, his flat cheeks giving no hint of expression, and he stopped to run his fingers through the coat of Catlin's big bay saddler. He said over his shoulder, "I got some riding to do up Bell Canyon way. There's half a dozen strays I couldn't find yesterday. I hear Mallon is bringing Hinks back from Idaho."

A distant magpie made its harsh racket, and Dan Galt waited, not turning. Then Catlin answered in a tight voice, "I may be goin' to Bell Canyon myself. No use two of us goin'."

"No," murmured Galt, "there wouldn't be much use of that." He had spoken his warning, and he swung about, meeting Catlin's dark gaze. Both men knew the rift of suspicion that lay between them.

"Friendly with Mallon these days?" Catlin asked quietly.

Galt considered the question. "I never had any trouble with the Boxed M," he replied slowly.

Catlin teetered on his heels and gave the younger man his oblique attention. He laughed suddenly and softly. "Just stick to your sodbustin', kid," he said, "and you won't have trouble with anyone. Go in' with us tonight?"

Galt shook his head and hung the wire-stretchers on a corral pole. Catlin went into the barn, and Galt could hear the colt pounding against the stall. The colt quieted, and Dan Galt plodded toward the cabin.

Herb Catlin had a way with horses; he was the best rider in this part of the country. Dan thought of the afternoon Herb had ridden the Boxed M's buckner, Chili Red. Afterward, Herb had said that horses were like women; the way to handle them was to outthink them. Mary Thorsen was

perched on the Boxed M corral alongside Dan Galt at the time, and Herb winked as he said it, so that all three laughed. That was eight years ago when Herb was nineteen and Dan Galt no more than fifteen. The remark didn't seem so funny now, and Dan wondered if Mary remembered it.

Dan went into the cabin, banged the door shut, and unloaded his pockets of staples and fence pliers. A fly droned over the gummy breakfast dishes, and he struck at it savagely. His blankets were a tumbled heap on the big double bed, and he stood for a moment, his thoughts drawing his lips in a thin compressed downcurve.

The whole cabin needed a cleaning. Galt had intended partitioning the cabin into three rooms, and the back end of the place was a litter of wood scraps and sawdust. Two sawhorses had been pushed against the wall. A saw and rule lay on the floor under them, and in the far corner was stacked the lumber he had brought from Minter six weeks ago. Through the window he could see the pipeline ditch that started at the spring on the hillside. Halfway to the cabin the open ditch ended abruptly, the piled earth weather-flattened now and sunbaked.

Galt fingered his jaw and crossed to the mirror above his shaving shelf. Generally he shaved twice a week. Now there was better than a week's raising of golden stubble on his blocky features. A man alone, he thought, could slip in a hell of a hurry, if he let himself. He looked, he guessed, like a horsethief or like old Anton Nulak. Only Anton never washed.

Galt shied his hat toward the bed and went to the stove. Embers from the breakfast fire remained in the grates, and he put on kindling. The woodbox was nearly empty. So were the water pails.

Galt made the trip to the spring. While water was heating, he straightened his bed and swept the floor. He washed the dishes, shaved, and went to the barn to turn out

the colt. The colt was nervous, and Galt paused in the stall with it, speaking softly and thinking of the work he must do. There were fence posts to haul and holes to dig. He'd have to bring in the team. And there was the acre of wild hay in the slough at the edge of Mallon's range that he wanted to cut. He saw the pick and shovel on the other side of the manger, and he was reminded bitterly of the unfinished ditch.

On sudden decision Galt saddled the colt and led it out of the barn. He mounted, and they went jiggling past the cabin and down the Conault Creek trail, the colt shaking the bit chains impatiently, and Galt rebellious with the sense of all the work he was leaving undone.

IT WAS noon when Galt reached the creek bridge, and from beyond the cottonwoods came the clatter of Molly Perkle's dishpan. Galt crossed the bridge briskly and turned in at the gate. Molly had heard the colt on the planking and she was still by the back door with the dishpan, Dibbs holding to her skirt and squinting his baby eyes against the sun. Bill Perkle, grinning, was stopped halfway between the barn and the house.

Molly cried, "It's beans today. You have good ears, Dan Galt!" She scooped Dibbs into the dishpan and went into the house, Dibbs banging his heels and squealing with laughter.

Bill elevated his arm in solemn Indian greeting. "Goin' someplace?" he asked.

"To the mailboxes, I guess."

Bill shook his head. "No mail. Mary Thorsen rode down to the boxes this morning and stopped on the way back. Unfork the broomtail and we'll fill out the wrinkles. Dance tonight?"

Galt gazed toward the empty corral. "No," he said, "I guess not." He left the colt in the corral and trailed Bill to the wash-bench by the back door.

Galt started sloshing water on his face.

Dibbs was making a racket inside, and someone exclaimed, "Dibbs! That pan's hot!" Galt reached for a towel, and then Bill Perkle said, a shade too casually, "Mary's still here. I forgot to tell you. She's helping Molly with a dress for tonight."

Galt nodded curtly. "I know. I saw her horse. You forgot to close the barn door." He dried his hands and gave Bill a quick, hard glance. "Your memory's going bad, Bill," he murmured. "You want to watch it." He ran the comb through his stubby, straw-colored hair and went on in.

Dibbs, his eyes big and his face all scrubbed and shining, peered at Galt around a table leg. Molly, her lips puckered, was busy setting out the dishes, and Mary Thorsen was standing by the stove, the heat bringing a faint flush to her cheeks. She was a tall girl, Mary Thorsen, her fairness a natural complement for Herb Catlin's dark good looks; and that was the bitterness of Dan Galt's first thought when he saw her. She was turned to him, and, as he stopped there, her voice, calm and controlled, carried through the sudden silence. "Hello, Dan Galt," she said.

Molly Perkle was watching these two narrowly, and immediately, as Dan answered, she made a rattling with her dishes. "Trust a man to show up at meal-times!" she cried in mock petulance.

"Yesterday it was old Anton, the day before it was Joe Sedwick, and today it's you, Dan Galt."

"And the more they come the tougher they look," Bill Perkle spoke from the doorway. "What do you think, Mary?"

Mary Thorsen turned back to the stove. "A man has to get a square meal sometime," she said quietly.

Dan forced a grin at Molly. "What this country needs," he said, "is more good cooks and fewer husbands. Bill knows it, and he's getting spooky." He

squatted on his heels and poked a forefinger toward Dibbs.

Bill hoisted Dibbs to his chair, and they all sat about the table then. The talk of the two women was about the dance that night and the dress they were completing, but Dan ate with strict attention to his plate, speaking little until Mary, across from him, asked, "Dan, did Herb borrow Whitefoot and the buggy?"

Dan nodded. "He was over to see me this morning."

"And you let him have them, I suppose!" Molly said.

Dan stared at her, faintly puzzled. "Why not?" he asked. "He's taking Mary to the dance, isn't he?"

Molly's lips were set thin with disapproval, and her glance turned to Mary Thorsen. "So I hear," she said acidly.

Color ran along the curve of Mary Thorsen's throat and touched her cheeks. "I'd thought," she murmured to Dan, "that we might see you there. I haven't seen you in a month."

"Dan," said Bill Perkle, "is too busy a man to go dancin' these days. Got the water to the cabin yet, Dan?"

"Not yet," Dan answered briefly.

"I'm anxious, Dan," Molly spoke in a flat tone, "to see your cabin now. I suppose it's all finished."

"No," said Dan, "that's not finished either." He took out his tobacco, and in the ensuing silence he could feel Molly Perkle's eyes upon him, sharp and probing.

Bill Perkle suddenly pushed back his chair. "Come on, Dan," he said, "Let's go outside."

Dan followed Bill to the cottonwood in front of the house, and they stretched out there on the grass. "I've often wished that I knew the secret of success," Bill drawled. "Herb Catlin dropped three hundred in a poker game at Charlie Mayo's last Wednesday night. Where does he get it?"

"I wouldn't know. Maybe he had money when he came back."

"Maybe. . . ."

Dan propped himself on one elbow and stared at Bill Perkle. "Get a man down once," he said harshly, "and everybody kicks him. Mallon owned the judge and the jury both, or Herb never would have been railroaded. It was Tracy Catlin who was rustlin' from the Boxed M—not Herb. Tracy was too slick for Mallon, and Herb got the blame." His voice rose. "Herb has courage enough to come back here and try to live it down, and now you're all—"

"I'm not deaf," Bill interrupted mildly. "And I'm not a mile away. There's some tolerance about those things—when an outfit is as big as the Boxed M. I hear some of the boys think Herb is quite a hero. I guess not all of us think he's a rustler. Mary don't, or she wouldn't be goin' to the dance with him. You ought to see Herb at the dances. He's real popular with the women."

Dan was silent. Bill squinted at him and opened his shirt, baring a round, pursed scar on his shoulder. "Dan, d'you see that bullethole? That was the only time in my life I really got in trouble. It was back in the Dakotas when I was eighteen. There was a fellow a few years older'n me, and ever since I was a kid I'd made a kind of hero out of him. I didn't know then—"

Dan got to his feet. "Never mind," he said bleakly. "You make a poor liar, Bill. Anyhow, I remember four years ago when you ran the pitchfork in your shoulder."

Bill sighed and closed his eyes. "Sit down and rest yourself," he invited. "We'll change the subject."

Dan shook his head. "No, I guess not." He went to the corral and got the colt. Molly came to the back door and moved around the side of the house, to where Bill was under the tree. Dan swung into the saddle, and as he passed the cotton-

wood Bill raised his head and called, "Watch out for wooden money!"

Molly was standing by her husband, her hands on her hips, staring hard at Dan. Dan stuck out his lower lip. "Sourface," he said.

There was no relaxing in Molly's stiffness. "You're a fool, Dan Galt," she said distinctly. "What you need is a good talking to."

"Maybe." Dan grinned and wheeled the colt toward the gate. As he left the ranchyard his shoulders settled heavily. He crossed the bridge again and a mile beyond he turned from the Conault Creek trail, taking the long way home.

THIS was Boxed M range where Galt was now, and presently two of Mallon's riders showed on an adjacent slope. Both men packed saddle guns, and they started a wary circling movement. Galt shouted and lifted his hat so they might recognize him. They halted then, and Galt could see them waiting there, somberly watchful of him till he was out of sight.

The land rose, increasing patches of brush appeared, and hills, dark with *piñon* coverage, made a barrier before Galt. Directly ahead was the deep notch of Bell Canyon. Somewhere in the brush a calf plaintively bawled, and Galt went that way.

He came upon the calf, a lean, week-old whiteface, alone in the bottom of a shallow gully. Nearby was a brush corral, and all about the dust was pocked with cattle tracks. Here was a story plain to any stockman, and for a long moment Galt sat quiet and stern-faced, gazing at the bawling calf and at this cunningly hidden corral. Then he slipped to the ground, lifted the calf to the saddle before him, and rode on.

He emerged from the brush, and a voice hailed him imperatively. He pulled up sharp, turning to see Tom Rathdrum and

Val Hinks jogging, unhurried, along the grassland toward him. The two separated as they came on. Rathdrum, foreman for the Boxed M, a heavy, florid-faced man, jerked his thumb at the calf. "Yours?" he asked brusquely.

Galt shook his head. "Yours, I guess. Anyway I found him on your range. He's lost his mammy."

"Where'd you find him?"

Galt made a vague circular gesture. "Back a piece."

Rathdrum nodded. "A funny thing," he observed thoughtfully, "how a cow and calf always go back to where they lost each other. They'll wait for days sometimes. It's a trick that's hung the deadwood on more than one careless man. They slip up and leave the calf, or maybe the cow, behind. Any idea, Dan, where this calf's mammy is now?"

Galt shrugged. "Dead, maybe. How do I know?"

Rathdrum's gaze, speculative, swung to the opening of Bell Canyon. His voice was quietly insistent. "Want to guess?"

Galt was silent. Valentine Hinks, one of those tough, leather-cheeked little men who seem impervious to all emotion, had his hand on his side gun and was regarding Galt intently. Rathdrum mopped his streaming face with a bandanna. "Let's put the calf down," he said, "and see where he goes."

Galt lifted the calf to the ground, and it set out for the brush, bawling as it ran. Rathdrum started after it. "I'll be back," he called.

Galt yawned, and his gaze wandered off to the distant hill lines. Hinks edged around till the sun was behind him. "Don't get ideas," he warned.

Rathdrum returned, the calf across his saddle. He nodded to Hinks. "Up Bell Canyon somewhere," he said.

Hinks squinted at Galt. "Well?" he asked meaningly.

Rathdrum shook his head. "No, not

Dan. I'll stake anything on that. You don't understand, Val. Dan's got nothin' to do with it. It'll be Catlin, like I said. The only thing is, Dan and Catlin are friends—or Dan thinks they are." Suddenly and fiercely the Boxed M foreman cried: "Dan, you're a damn fool! He ain't worth it!"

Dan looked at him stonily. "That all?"

Rathdrum handed him the calf. "Keep it," he said. "Val, you go along with him. Wait at his place for me. I'm goin' up the canyon a way."

"You and Mallon!" Hinks grumbled. "No wonder these fellers are stealin' you blind. If you'd let me handle it—" He prodded Galt's horse. "Get goin'," he said.

Galt left the calf in the barn, went to the cabin, and stretched out on the bed. Hinks found his gun in the cupboard and ejected the shells. Afterward, he propped a chair against the wall so that he could watch the bed and the door.

Several hours later Rathdrum rode up. "Found 'em," he said. "A hundred head anyway. Corralled up Bell Canyon."

Hinks kept his pale eyes on Galt. "See anybody?" he asked Rathdrum.

"No. I got out in a hurry. There's no feed, so he'll be drivin' right away. Catlin's worked it once too often."

Galt rolled over in bed. "Tom, you're talking through your hat. Herb hasn't been out of the country since he came back."

"I told you," said Hinks. "This jasper's in it right along with Catlin."

"And I tell you he ain't," Rathdrum replied patiently. "Dan's just dumb. Catlin gave him a set of spurs once when he was a kid, and Dan can't forget it. Dan, did you know that Tracy has a little spread of his own just across the state line? Herb corrals 'em, and then Tracy comes and drives 'em out. By the time the stuff gets there, it's wearing Tracy's brand."

Galt stared at the ceiling. "Tracy Catlin," he said, "never was any good. That's not Herb Catlin's fault, but the Boxed M has been damning him for it as long as I remember. No wonder Herb hates the Boxed M! I'm getting that way myself. Now get out of here, Tom, and take your gun-dog with you!"

Rathdrum left the doorway. "Watch him, Val," he ordered. "I'll get some men."

The hoofbeats of Rathdrum's horse faded in the distance, and Galt got off the bed. Hinks watched him like a cat. When Galt went to the barn to care for the colt, Hinks was treading right at his heels. Galt returned to the cabin and began preparations for supper. Hinks brightened. "I wondered if you ever ate at this place," he said.

"To hell with you!" Galt flared.

Hinks seated himself morosely, laid a gun on his lap, and rolled a cigarette. He sat there silently smoking, his pale eyes becoming narrowed and shrewd. "That's a horse you got out in the barn," he observed carelessly. "Want to sell?"

"No!" Then Galt nodded grudgingly. "He will be a horse in another year. A real horse." He put his plate on the table, hesitated, and got out another plate. "All right," he growled, "pull up a chair."

It was early dark when Tom Rathdrum came again. He poked his head in the cabin and grinned at the two seated by the lamplit table. "Buddies now, eh?"

Galt went to washing dishes. "Take him away," he said.

"No-o," Rathdrum answered regretfully. "I can't. You'd warn Herb. Herb's taking Mary Thorsen to the dance tonight."

"That's his business."

"Sure, sure. Only I thought—" Rathdrum's voice trailed off lamely. Horses stamped in the ranchyard behind him, and through the open doorway Galt could see the dark forms of men. Rathdrum spoke

briskly to Hinks. "Catlin won't show up till after the dance. I sent Bud and Sam to keep an eye on him. We're goin' on to the canyon now. You stay here, Val."

Hinks looked sourly at Galt. "Why not tie him?"

"I don't want to do that. Dan's all right; he's just a little dumb about Herb. You stay here." Rathdrum went to his horse, and the Boxed M men left the ranchyard.

Galt finished the dishes and lay on the bed again. Hinks prowled restlessly. He paused at the piled lumber in the corner. "Fixin' up the shebang, eh? Goin' to get married?"

"No!" said Galt.

Hinks knit his brow. "Now me," he stated with an air of profundity, "I never married, neither. I—"

"Never mind. You make me sleepy," Galt interrupted. He dropped his lids, watching Hinks from beneath his lashes. Hinks sauntered back to his chair. He laid his gun on his lap, pulled his hat over his eyes, and settled there, a slumped and seemingly oblivious figure in the dingy lamp-glow. An ember crackled in the stove; after that there was a long silence.

Galt suddenly put out his hand for his tobacco, and Hinks remained motionless. Galt smoked two cigarettes before he cautiously set his feet on the floor. Hinks pushed back his hat. "Goin' someplace?" he asked.

Galt stoked the fire, emptied the two water pails into the big washtub and set it on the stove. He went to the spring for more water, Hinks padding alertly behind him. "A nice night," the little gunman observed.

Back in the cabin again, Galt got out clean underwear and a shirt. When the water was warm he lifted the tub to the floor and stripped. Hinks whistled softly. "A husky, ain't you, feller?" He watched critically from his chair while Galt lathered and rinsed. "Now me," the little

man ruminated, "I ain't so big, but I've fooled lots of 'em. I'm kinda wiry."

Galt dried himself and opened the door. He caught the tub by the handles, water sloshed along the floor, and Hinks jerked up his feet. "Watch it, feller!" he cried.

Galt made one quick motion and flung the tub and all that soapy water full into Hinks' face. The gun banged as Galt leaped, and the two men went down in a twisting heap, the chair sliding away and the tub rolling and clattering. Galt shook the gun out of Hinks' hand and for a moment they remained motionless, Galt kneeling on Hinks' shoulders and Hinks with his hat off, his eyes shut tight, and his head showing bald and glistening.

Galt got to his feet and dragged Hinks across the room to where he had a lasso-rope coiled on a peg. He trussed Hinks and dropped him on the bed. At once Hinks buried his tightly closed eyes in the blankets. Galt dressed, and when he looked again, Hinks had the soap out of his eyes and he was staring at Galt with an expression of the deepest despair. "I wasn't expectin' it," he muttered, dismally. "What'll Tom say? What'll he say now?"

Galt righted the chair and picked up the tub. He held the tub so that Hinks might see the bullet hole in its shiny bottom. "Look at it!" he cried furiously. "And I just got it! Do you know what I paid for that tub?" He kicked the tub into a corner, slammed the door, and went to saddle the colt.

IT WAS after midnight when Galt reached Minter. The dance was in the old hotel barn at the far end of the street. Galt circled and came to the street again through the alley in the rear of the hotel. He dismounted and stood there in the shadows. Babe Fulman, a lanky boy of eighteen, passed, and Galt spoke to him. "Find Herb Catlin, will you, Babe? Tell him I'm here."

Babe braced himself to peer owlishly at Galt. "That you, Dan?" he asked thickly. "Sure, I'll tell him. Friend of mine, ain't he? Best damn man in this country, even if he did do three years in the pen. No 'fence, Dan. I think the more of Herb for it. I swear I do!" He moved off uncertainly, his spurs clinking on the plank walk.

Galt held the colt close by the bridle and waited, watching the street. Horses lined the hitchracks. Across the way, men were grouped, talking loudly, in front of Charlie Mayo's saloon. Soft laughter sounded on the hotel porch. Music and the pound of feet from the barn made a steady throbbing in the warm night air. A voice behind Galt whispered, "That you, kid?" and Galt turned, staring into the darkness.

He saw Herb Catlin, a lean, tall shape in the night gloom, move up and stand beside the colt, and Galt murmured, "Tom Rathdrum and Hinks found some stock corralled up Bell Canyon. Mallon's men are waiting there now. Two of them are at the dance to watch you."

Catlin gripped Galt's arm. "Dan, where'd you get that? Tracy's comin' tonight! We've got to head him off!"

A slow anger stirred Dan Galt. "What do I care about Tracy?" he asked bitterly. "Haven't I done enough? Do you think Tom Rathdrum won't know who warned you?"

Catlin's hand fell to his side. "Kid," he said, "how long have you known about Tracy and me?"

"I don't know," Galt answered wearily. "I've guessed it, I figure ever since you came back."

Catlin nodded. "I thought that. Well, I always figured you knew how it was. Tracy got me into this the same as he got me into my first trouble with Mallon, Kid. What good is it to warn me, if they get Tracy? Tracy'll talk—I know that brother of mine! You're sure they're watchin' me now?"

"That's what Tom Rathdrum said."

"Fat Tom!" Catlin chuckled quietly.

"Kid, we'll outfox him yet! I'll get Mary and start for home. You be waitin' at the big cottonwood by Tanner creek. It's good and dark there. I'll take your horse and flag Tracy, and you drive Mary on home in the buggy. If anybody's been followin', they'll think I'm still in the buggy, right?"

Galt shook his head. "What'll you tell Mary?"

"Tell her? Kid, we tell 'em nothin'. Mary'll keep still, whatever she thinks. The Boxed M never did the Thorsens any favors." Catlin slipped away, and his voice drifted back, muted in the darkness. "I'm dependin' on you, kid."

Galt led the colt through the alley. Defiance flared in him as he remembered Molly Perkle and her parting words that afternoon. Afterward, he was resigned. Molly, he guessed, was probably right, and there was no help for it. A half hour out of Minter, he heard the buggy on the road behind him.

The road leaving Minter was a long downgrade to the crossing at Tanner creek. There, where the shadows were deepest and Galt was waiting with the colt, whitefoot slowed to a walk and Catlin leaped from the buggy. The colt had not yet come to his full strength and weight, and already this night he had been ridden hard. Galt paused a moment, his hand reluctant on the bridle. "Take it easy," he cautioned.

Catlin laughed gently. "Dan, are you tellin' me how to ride a horse?" He swung into the saddle and Galt saw the pale flash of his teeth, and then he had whirled the colt and vanished along the creek trail, and Galt was running after Whitefoot and the slow-moving buggy.

He scrambled into the seat, and Mary Thorsen handed him the lines. Whitefoot stepped out briskly and they left Tanner Creek, Dan hunched over the lines and

miserable in his thoughts, and the tall, fair-haired girl silent beside him. When they had passed the crest of Deever Hill, Mary Thorsen spoke quietly. "Two riders followed us from Minter," she said. "I saw them. They must still be following. Dan, what is it? Herb's in trouble again. Is it the Boxed M?"

"No," said Galt, "There's no trouble. It's—"

She laid her hand on his arm. "Don't, Dan."

Galt stared rigidly at Whitefoot's bobbing ears. "There's no trouble," he repeated. But her hand remained upon his arm and she waited, and at last he muttered helplessly: "It's Tracy, Mary. You can't blame Herb. It's that damn Tracy."

"We said that the first time, Dan. Both of us." Her hand was gone then, and her voice was bitter. "Dan, when I was a little girl I'd have done anything to be noticed by Herb Catlin. I was seventeen when they took him away to prison. He smiled at me that day and promised he'd be back to prove his innocence. I never forgot—I guess I didn't try. You've known that, haven't you, Dan?"

Dan Galt nodded. "Yes," he said dully. "I've known it all along. Sometimes I pretended to myself that it was different, but I knew just the same. You didn't need to tell me, Mary. Any girl would feel that way about Herb."

Her words went on, remote now and strangely thoughtful. "It's been like that with you too, hasn't it, Dan? Herb was always good to you when you were little, and you thought there was no one like him. It seems hard for us to grow up."

"Yes," he answered vaguely. "I guess that's right."

She said no more, and when he looked he saw her staring straight ahead. It was as if she had forgotten him. He turned away then, and took Mary home, each silent, Dan Galt with his gaze fixed upon the dim strip of road running before them.

From Thorsen's, Galt had another four mile drive to his own place. Hinks was on the bed as he had left him, and Galt untied the little gunman and said, "Two of your men followed me from town. They must have thought I was someone else."

Hinks rubbed his wrists. "Tom Rathdrum," he murmured, "will take it hard when I tell him you tipped off Catlin. A bad night's work for you, feller—and me, too!" He got his hat and gun, and went out into the darkness.

THE sun was climbing the horizon when Galt awoke to the sound of horses in the ranch yard. Tom Rathdrum flung open the door and gave Galt his long, humorless consideration. "You'd better pile out of the feathers, Dan," he said, "and take a look in your corral. We found them up Bell Canyon along with our stuff. I don't know why we troubled to bring them back." He spun on his heel and left without closing the door.

Dan Galt lay in bed and watched the departing Boxed M men. Somewhere outside a cow bawled, and Galt reached for his tobacco and papers. Later, he dressed and moved wearily to the corral. Five of his cows were there, his own brand on them running clear and bold. Herb Catlin's bay saddler was grounded by the feed stack, and in a moment Herb himself came out of the barn.

"Tracy," Herb said, "must be a hundred miles from here by now. You ought to have seen that brother of mine go! What did fat Tom say? I just saw him leavin'."

Galt shook his head. "Nothing much."

Herb motioned to the cows in the corral. "Sorry about that, kid. It was night and they were mixed with the Boxed M stuff. We'd have made it right with you."

Galt nodded. "The colt's in the barn?" he asked.

"His saddle is, kid." Herb leaned against the corral beside Galt and said gently, "Last night your horse stuck his leg in a hole a mile from my place and snapped it clean. I had to run on foot the rest of the way to catch Tracy." He put his hand on Galt's shoulder. "I'm sorry, kid."

Afterward there was a silence, and Galt turned his head till he could see the half completed pipeline ditch on the hillside. Suddenly then he was speaking, and his voice was strange and flat to his own ears. "It's all right about the colt," he said, "but I guess you'll have to keep away from Mary Thorsen, Herb. I can't let that happen, too."

"What's that?" Herb growled. "What's that?" He swung Galt around.

Galt took a step back, with Catlin's fingers digging into his shoulder, and he said, "Herb, take your hand off me. Take it off!" Then he had no knowledge how it happened, only he heard the sharp concussion of his fist and he saw Herb Catlin lift entirely off his feet and go sprawling in the dirt.

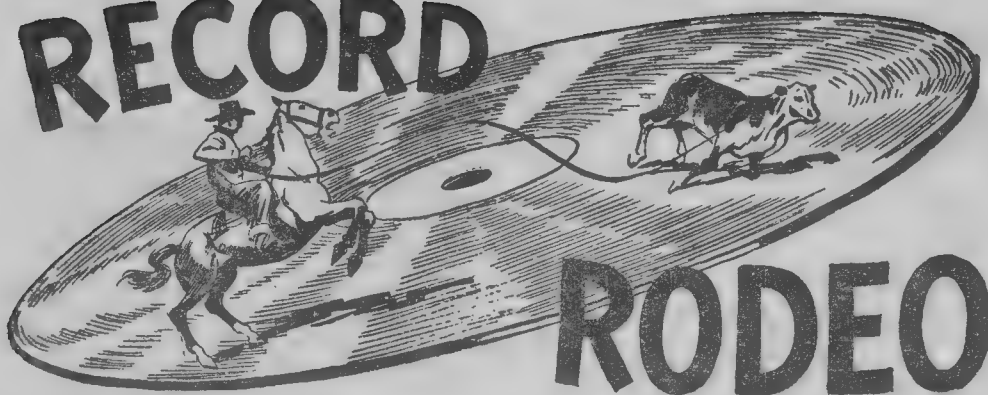
For the moment shocked amazement showed in Catlin's face. He got his legs under him and came up, his eyes burning and the color running high on his thin cheeks, and he cried out, "Kid, I'll have to teach you a lesson!"

Galt shook his head slowly. "No," he said. "You can't teach me anything now. I'm a better man than you are, Herb. That's what I should have learned long ago." And he waited there, a broad and formidable figure in the early sunlight.

Catlin rocked on his heels, and a change came over his features. They were no longer darkly handsome, but were pale and sharp and full of vindictiveness. He started to speak, then abruptly he clapped his hand to his jaw as if from pain, and went to his horse. He mounted, and when he turned his lips were smiling

(Continued on page 129)

RECORD



RODEO

By Joey Sasso

WE VALUE your opinions on these record sessions, fans, and we'd very much like to hear from you. Sound off, and you may be a prizewinner. For the best letter discussing the reviews in each issue, the writer will receive, absolutely free, one of the best new albums of Western music. The writers of the two next best letters will each find in the mail, with our compliments, one of the latest Western releases. Address your letters to Joey Sasso, care of this magazine, at 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

TIE up with us for a spell, platter fans, and we'll talk about music once again. We're pleased to report that the boom in prairie pressings is just as strong as it was when we last met to talk it over, and there's no sign of slackening, either. You've got the record manufacturers roped and tied, and they're going all out to give you the Western music that you want. They've brought the Old West back again through its deathless songs and rhythms. And since the Old West is being relived in the twang of the guitar and the cry of the fiddle, we're here to tell you all about the best of it that's on wax. Keep your eyes on the chutes, you record wranglers—here they come!

SKIP TO MY LOU AND OTHER SQUARE DANCES (RCA Victor Album)

Roy Rogers calling, with Spade Cooley and his String Orchestra. Roy Rogers, whose name is synonymous with sagebrush serenades and wide-open-spaces activities, now leads an authentic Western air to Spade Cooley's vigorous and rous-

ing collection of "Swing Your Partner" ditties, which include "Skip To My Lou and Other Square Dances." With Roy Rogers right in there delivering the calls, and Spade's perky fiddle setting the musical pace, there will be no resisting this sparkling compendium of square dance favorites. Roy's calling and Spade Cooley and the zestful fiddling of his String Orchestra provide a double feature musical invitation to the square dance, and the devotees of this new yet old rustic craze will now have a double incentive to keep "swinging their partners."

SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO RED RIVER VALEY SONS OF THE PIONEERS (RCA Victor)

The Sons of the Pioneers, those outstanding sagebrush serenaders whose radio, film and record appearances have made them one of the top Western groups, pay tribute now to "Santa Fe, New Mexico," with a melodic description of that Southwestern city. Their guitars and fiddles lending tuneful support as the Sons sing of the charms of this famous town in a way that

will no doubt start a stampede to New Mexico. The pairing is the famous old standard, which glistens anew with the Pioneer treatment. Their distinctive vocal blend, which has made them so popular, brings out all the charm of this old favorite.

**WHIRLWIND
WHEN THE SILVER COLORADO
TURNS TO GOLD
GENE AUTRY
(Columbia)**

Stan Jones, writer of "Ghost Riders In The Sky," has come up with another smash hit, "Whirlwind." This is a terrific song with many of the same qualities as "Riders," and it fits Autry so well it might have been written for him. He does a superb job, and some truly thrilling effects are obtained by the use of an echo chamber. Gene is backed, as usual, by The Pinafores, the Cass County Boys, and Carl Cotner's orchestra. The reverse side is a typical Western ballad of the type Gene does so well.

**I WONDER WHY I WORRY OVER
YOU
YOU'RE SO HEARTLESS
SAM NICHOLS WITH THE MELODY
RANGERS
(M-G-M)**

One of the West's brightest vocal stars, Sam Nichols, offers two blues songs from the country of the wide open spaces on an M-G-M platter that's a "must" for you Folk fans. The first number is medium-tempoed with a steady movement to it, while the flip slows the pace a bit. The Melody Rangers provide excellent backgrounds for both sides, coming through with their usual quota of fine solo shots on the choruses.

**MAMA DON'T ALLOW IT
MEMORY OF A ROSE
JERRY IRBY WITH HIS TEXAS
RANCHERS
(M-G-M)**

Jerry Irby and his Texas Ranchers have a hotter-than-hot Western jam session on "A" side here. The number that allows

for the Folk jammer is *Mama Don't Allow It*, the famous pop oldie all decked out in chaps and spurs. On the reverse, Jerry offers up an Irby original, an easy-on-the-ears, bluesy number. Jerry and his Ranchers are on their way up in popularity, and these two sides should go a long way toward pushing them further.

**RICH MAN, POOR MAN, BEGGAR
MAN, THIEF
MAKE BELIEVE HEART
SMOKEY ROGERS
(Capitol)**

Smokey Rogers, featured favorite with Tex Williams in Universal Pictures and The Western Caravan, presents two songs that will delight the horde of Rogers fans. Both are ballads.

**CROCODILE TEARS
THE WINTER SONG
TEX WILLIAMS
(Capitol)**

First Western version of this popular tune. Tex and the Western Caravan are in the groove. No Western swing. A warm and cozy number with the beauty of the winter season painted by Tex's vocal artistry. The Western Caravan gives appropriate sound effects.

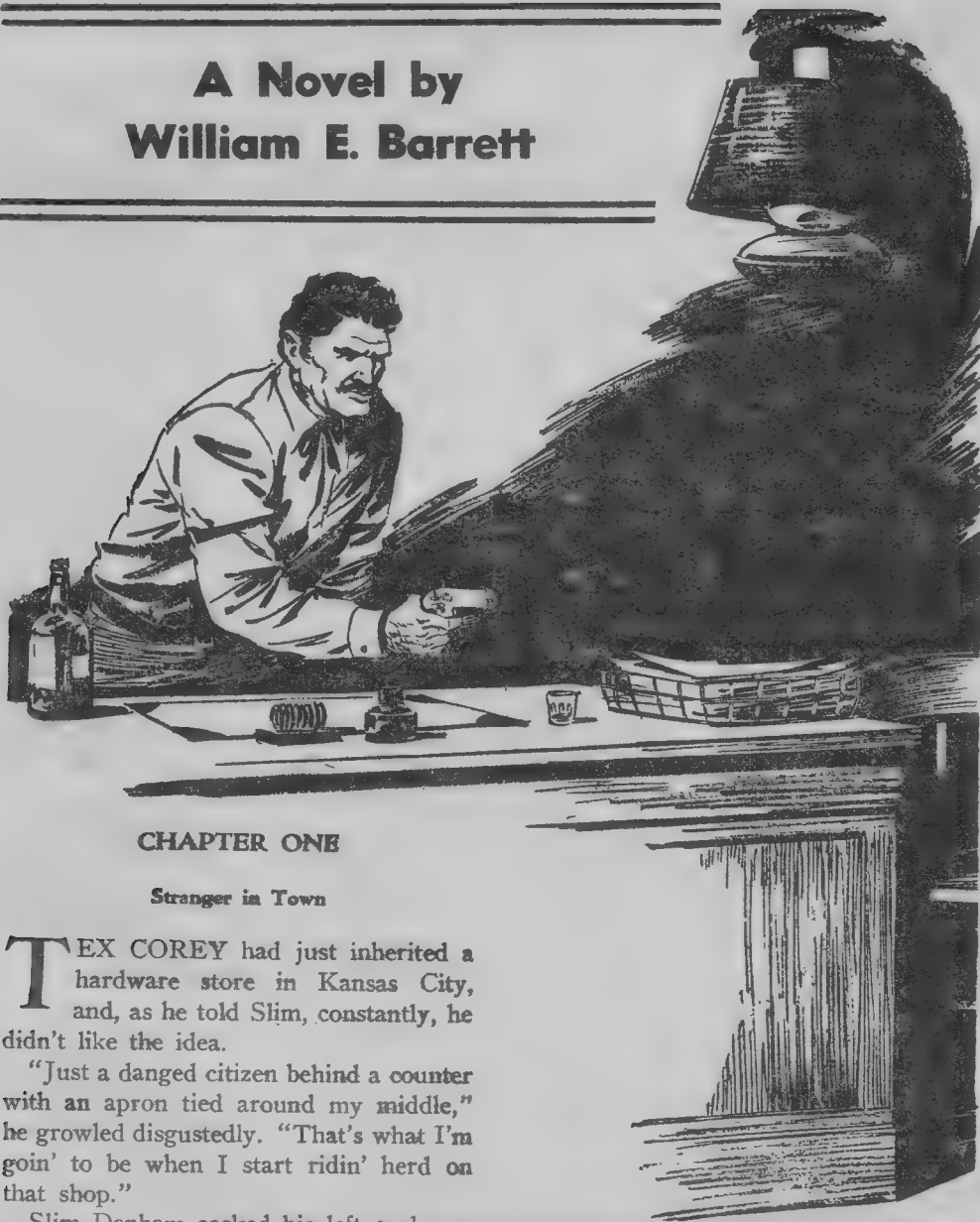
**WAGON WHEELS
RED RIVER VALLEY
ANDY PARKER AND THE PLAINSMEN
(Capitol)**

Two of the greatest songs of the West sung by the outstanding western vocal organization of the day.

**I'LL NEVER SLIP AROUND AGAIN
REVENGE
TEXAS JIM ROBERTSON AND THE
PANHANDLE PUNCHERS
(RCA Victor)**

The rich, resonant voice of Texas Jim Robertson has a repentant note, telling us that "I'll Never Slip Around Again." This is a sequel to the popular hillbilly tune, "Slipping Around." The reverse is a bitter number which Jim handles eloquently and well.

A Novel by William E. Barrett



CHAPTER ONE

Stranger in Town

TEX COREY had just inherited a hardware store in Kansas City, and, as he told Slim, constantly, he didn't like the idea.

"Just a danged citizen behind a counter with an apron tied around my middle," he growled disgustedly. "That's what I'm goin' to be when I start ridin' herd on that shop."

Slim Denham cocked his left eyebrow. "You don't wear an apron in a hardware store," he said.

"You might just as well wear one," Tex shrugged. "Why not?"

Slim threw up his hands. "If I've got to argue with you clear to Kaycee," he said, "this is gonna be a helluva trip."

"It's gonna be a helluva trip anyway.

Playing nurse to a lot of traveling cattle isn't my idea of transportation."

Slim shrugged and started to deal himself a game of solitaire on a boxtop. "It's cheap," he said, "and an heir to a hardware store that's dead broke hasn't got a kick over being the assistant to a man on a one man job. No kick whatever."

KAYCEE—OR HELL!

*"We got a boothill here for quick-iron men,
stranger — dug by them that's quicker!"*

*Copyright 1936 by Popular Publications, Inc., under
the original title, "One Gun—One Dollar."*

Corey's fist landed on
Frenchy's jaw. . . .



"There's men that's born to lowdown jobs and there's them that never get used to them," Tex answered. He got up and prowled to the platform. They had rattled to a stop at some forsaken station or other. Almost anything was acceptable as a change from the noisy, odorous clatter of the cattle train. The constant argument with Slim had been all that made the trip bearable. It had made many a winter camp bearable, too, before this. Now the range and all that it stood for was dropping behind them. In Kansas City, Slim would take a job in the stockyards, and Tex would run the hardware store he had inherited from an uncle he had never seen.

"Lowdown jobs is the only kind of jobs you ever had, yuh polecat!" Slim growled. "If hardware storing in Kaycee is a decent job, you'll have tuh sell—"

Slim's voice followed Tex out the door. Corey didn't look around. "Probably nobody's danged fool enough to buy a hardware store," he said.

He stepped onto a platform that was like so many others he had known; a single station lamp on a pothook, a building sadly in need of paint, the bawling of cattle from the loading pens. He walked to the outer edge of the illuminated circle that was the lamp's range and looked up at the sign. **BANNOCK**. It didn't mean much to him. He had a vague idea that it was the county seat of somewhere, but as far as he was concerned, it was just a place where the train stopped.

He was turning on his heel at the platform edge when he saw two dark figures dart out from the shadow of a concealing stack of lumber and make for the long, dark train. They might have been hoboese, except for the way they ran and for their uncertainty once they reached the train. They stopped short and seemed undecided as to the next move. Corey grunted.

It was none of his business, but it was unusual and he was bored. He crossed toward them swiftly, and when they turned,

startled, he put a commanding growl into his voice.

"What's the idea, you!"

No one, not even with a guilty conscience, had a right to be so startled. The taller of the two figures took the lead. He put his companion behind him and faced Corey shakily. He was only a youngster, nineteen or twenty, and dressed in gray shirt and corduroys. His face gleamed white in the overflow of illumination from the platform.

"We're not regular tramps," he said huskily. "We're just bumming our way out of town on that freight."

Corey grinned. "You don't have to be scared about it," he chuckled. "You sure ain't regular tramps, but—" he shook his head—"you're not bumming your way out of town, and that's no freight. It's a cattle train."

"We've got to get out of town. We—"

The youngster was desperate, but he was thin and none too strong and lacking in aggressiveness. Corey stood between him and the dark bulk of the train. "You'll get yourself killed, Bub. That's a fact. You've got to know how to ride these things."

"We're ready to take a chance. We—"

For the first time, Corey got a good look past the pleading youngster to the second half of the "we." He stopped the jocular comment that was already forming on his lips and his Stetson came off awkwardly. The second "boy" was a girl; a girl in well-worn whipcord breeches and scuffed riding boots. Corey flushed. He had been having a good time at the expense of these youngsters, but if there was a situation desperate enough to send a young girl like this to hopping trains in the dark, then his humor had been badly timed.

"I'm sorry, ma'am," he said, "I shouldn't have been so downright comic."

"You'll let us go?" The girl was looking anxiously toward the train. There was a rattling of couplings, a forlorn

whistle from the locomotive. Corey's lips tightened.

He ought to be aboard right now himself, and if this was really a pair of kids in a jam, he'd take a chance and get them on the train, but bringing the girl aboard would mean trouble, not only for himself but for the train crew.

"We're going to talk this over," he said grimly. "Let's go over in the lumber, where you were."

"We can't. We've got to get out on that train."

"So do I," Corey said.

COREY was watching the train get under way with a sort of dull wonder. These kids meant nothing to him. He was a long way from Kansas City and he had five dollars in his pocket. He had a hunch, too, that the two before him had nothing to add to his trouble-filled prospects except more trouble. But he was staying.

Slim'll bust a cinch, he thought. But he reckoned it was a one-man job anyhow.

He was suddenly adjusted to whatever lay ahead. He had reached decisions in just that way all his life. It was worrisome, but a man didn't have to spend half his life wondering what was going to happen next; things just happened anyway.

"Whatever's going to get you will get all three of us," he said. "Smoke?"

He held out the crumpled package of cigarettes to the boy, but was conscious of the girl's eyes fixed on him. They were deep eyes, and he couldn't tell their color, but he knew that her hair was coppery, because from under the soft, pressed-down hat that she wore there were waves of it escaping. The boy started to take a cigarette, then stopped with a shake of his head. Corey looked at him, startled, and saw the greenish pallor in the youngster's face, the perspiration on his forehead. He

was puzzled for a moment, then he knew.

"You kids are hungry."

"No. No!" The girl's denial was too swift, her worried glance at the boy too easy to read. Corey stepped in between them and whirled around.

"I'm hungry myself," he said. "We're going into town and have a feed," he said.

"No. We can't—really."

It was the girl who protested now, but with the same old painless protest, and it was not at all as much fun as arguing with Slim. An argument where nobody got abusive was pretty flat. He took the youngsters by their elbows and walked them towards town. The girl was about a year younger than the boy; slender and rounded and with a glow about her that comes from living in open country and never from living in towns. Little by little, their story came out.

The youngsters were Bob and Nell Rariden. Their folks had been homesteaders, but they hadn't been able to stand the life. They were both dead, and the kids had been trying to run an eating house in town. Some gent called Jess Gade had made Nell Rariden's life miserable with his attentions, and finally had forced their eating house to the wall.

Tex Corey listened to the story quietly as sister and brother alternated in the telling. Jess Gade, it seemed, was the big bogie man of Bannock. He owned the two big gambling houses, three eating places, the dancehall and the sheriff's office. He was supposed to be hand and glove with rustlers, providing them with the means of shipping rustled stock out of Bannock.

"Judge Wilson is the only one in town that dares stand against him, and the Judge can't do much without help. He's been trying to get the governor to do something, but he can't seem to get enough evidence," Bob Rariden explained, shrugging dispiritedly. They were walking the main drag now, a typical cowtown street on a night when cattle

are shipped. Noise blared from the saloons, and there was a tinny beat of music that located the dance hall. Sunburned, swaggering men clumped along the board sidewalks and jostled one another good-naturedly. Saddle leather creaked and horses stamped nervously at the hitching racks. There was a nip to the air and a smell of snow. Tex Corey's instinct pointed his feet to the biggest place on the drag: Bob Rariden slipped his grip.

"That's Jess Gade's place, his principal place. He'll be there himself probably." Bob's voice was shaky with fear.

"All the better, kid," he said enthusiastically. "That's where we eat. If he feels like getting tough, he wouldn't mind mussing up a place that belonged to someone else. He'll be fussy about his own spot."

"That's right, Bob. We'll eat there." The girl's chin was up. There was fear in her eyes that no man had the right to inspire, but she had the courage of a thoroughbred. Her brother muttered a little, but his thin shoulders squared.

They entered Gade's. It was called The Silver Dollar, and the name meant something. A meal cost just that; no more and no less. It was a pretentious place for a cowtown. The saloon was next door, cut off from the eating house by a partition. The place was furnished with chairs, a long counter and tables. Corey picked a table in the corner where he could sit with his back to the wall.

The waiter who took their order didn't speak any more than he had to, but he had nervous, ratty eyes that kept darting to the Raridens and away. Bob gulped his water when the man left the table.

"You saw how he looked at us," he whispered. "Well, he's one of Gade's men. Gade told me to get out of town. I told him where to head off about Nell."

"You did?" Tex Corey was startled. He couldn't imagine the frightened,

shivering, skinny youngster telling anybody where to head in, but in the sudden look that the boy threw his sister, there was a clue to the other side of his character. There was protection in that look. Bob Rariden could probably nerve himself up to take action in behalf of his sister that he would never take of his own accord or for himself. Corey could see the bruise, too, on the youngster's cheek, the swelled lump on his jaw. There was a story in those inconspicuous marks.

TEX COREY chewed that story over with his food. He watched the Raridens eat without appearing to do so. They were trying not to be too eager, but their hunger wouldn't wear a disguise.

A husky, flat-nosed bruiser with the map of Mexico on his face stamped noisily across the room. Everything that he wore was silver-studded; his holster, his low-top boots, the band of his sombrero. There was clatter and color and weight to him. He grinned a crooked yellow-toothed grin at people that he recognized, but the grin came off when he stopped before Corey's table. He ignored the Raridens and fastened his beady eyes on Corey. He gestured with a thick thumb.

"The boss! He's want you upstairs. Now."

There was arrogance in him—and challenge. Corey stared hard at him. "You don't see any apron on me, do you?" he asked.

The big husky seemed disconcerted. He fumbled around mentally with the apron idea and didn't connect it up. He frowned fiercely. "I say to you that the boss want you," he growled.

"Yeah." Corey rose slowly, very slowly. He was conscious of the fact that he was focussing many eyes as he stepped clear of the table. He was also conscious of the fact that his gun was with his gear on the cattle train.

"He's your boss, maybe," he said firmly. "But to me, he's just a guy I buy grub from. Tell him that."

The Mexican flushed as somebody in the room laughed. Corey was standing up to his six-foot bulk and Corey was deceptively average in build; tough and wiry but running not at all to size. Slim had once described his expression as "no expression at all" and it fit. He didn't wear his thoughts or emotions publicly. He looked almost meek now, and that was a come-on.

The Mexican made a mistake—two of them. He took time to curse and he started an annihilating blow with his right hand. Corey's left flicked out like a rattler's head and there was sting enough to it to throw the Mex off balance. In that wobbly split second, Corey's right hand boomed through to his chin and sent him to the floor.

The husky took a vacant table down with him when he went, and the clatter wakened the echoes around the four walls of the Silver Dollar. Nell Rariden gave a choked cry and there was a scraping of chairs as patrons of the eating house jumped up for a better look at the excitement. The man with the silver trappings glanced up dazedly, cursed and came to his feet.

His gun was clearing as he found his balance and Corey stepped into him fast. His left hand snapped and then his right came over. The lad from south of the border was no faster with the gun than he had been with the gunless hand. His feet tangled when he tried to avoid the overhand right punch, and when the punch landed, he dropped his gun. No gun-toter is ever more completely licked than when that happens.

Corey stepped back and he knew by the hushed, unnatural quiet of the Silver Dollar that the Raridens were not alone in their awe of the powers that sat the saddle in Bannock. No one whooped, no one

cussed and there was no joy over a swaggering Mex bully in the dust. The faces that Tex Corey could see showed only consternation and he caught a glance or two that seemed to be already mourning the dear departed.

He looked toward his own table. Nell Rariden was whiter than the oilcloth tabletop and her big eyes were fixed on him with a blending of fear and amazement. Bob Rariden, strangely enough, was flushed, his jaw hard. He was half out of his chair.

"Better get his gun, Tex," he said.

Corey shook his head. "No dice, Bob."

He was thinking of the immediate future, tipped off by the seriously intent expressions of those who were standing about the room.

He wasn't thinking far into the future, but far enough to guard against the mistake of inviting a play of firearms that might be fatal.

The Mexican still lay where he had fallen. He had gone down face first this last time, and he was trying now to raise his head. It was still too heavy for him.

Suddenly the attention of the crowd shifted. Corey sensed the shift before he consciously noted any evidence. He looked up. A man who was nearly as big as the Mexican, but of a totally different type, had come quietly into the room and moved down the counter. He was standing with his hands on his hips; a black-mustached individual in a shirt of white silk, breeches of light buckskin and boots heavily inlaid with fancywork.

Corey's eyes ranged carefully up the picture of cowtown elegance and stopped when they met the eyes beneath the Stetson. They were slaty gray eyes, and looking into them was like looking into an open grave.

Tex Corey needed no identification, no labels. This man had to be the boss of the town that he was in or seek another town. This was Jess Gade.

CHAPTER TWO

The Boss of Bannock

JESS GADE'S voice was as soft as his eyes were hard. "I sent my man after you. There seems to have been some trouble." He was lounging a little in his stance and he was wearing no guns. Six or eight feet behind him and a little toward the center of the room stood a man who was wearing guns; a short, thin, wiry individual with a French cast of countenance and eyes as unblinking as an Indian's. That, of course, would be the bodyguard, and Corey was satisfied with the hunch that had made him leave the Mexican's gun where it lay. He faced the slaty eyes with his chin jutting.

"I told your man that I didn't work here," Tex explained. "He didn't believe me." He nodded briefly toward the man on the floor. "There was a bit of an argument."

"I see." Jess Gade didn't look at anyone in the room but Corey, but he was obviously aware of the others. He had an actor's trick of playing to an audience as though no audience existed. "Well, now that the argument is over, suppose that you come along to my private office!"

There was command in his voice which took any weakness out of the "suppose." Corey was feeling that command, feeling the strength of the man, the lack of support from the crowd which, although a group of strangers, was comprised of his own people. But he was not prepared to knuckle down—not even with the chill of the expressionless eyes and the silent room in his blood.

"I'm eating grub I paid for, Mister. That's all the business I've got here," he said grimly. "I'm passing through."

Gade's expression did not change. "You're not wearing a gun," he said. "You better get one."

His eyes flicked briefly to the Raridens.

"I told you to get out of town," he said.

He turned on his heel and walked back the way he had come. The French-looking bodyguard moved inconspicuously after him, and the Mexican paused only to glare at Corey before he dropped into line. Corey dropped into his place at the table.

"My grub's cold," he said.

He felt the eyes of the Raridens on him and he continued to be nonchalant. Inwardly, however, he felt very uncomfortable. When a man is told to get a gun, he is being told that he is going to need one.

"You've got guts." The respect in Bob Rariden's voice brought a flush to Corey's wind-toughened face. Corey waved one hand negligently.

"So have you," he said quietly. "Has anybody else in town got any?" He looked briefly around the hushed room. "Or have they all lost theirs?"

"Judge Wilson and Tim O'Meara," Bob told him. "The judge is trying to put the skids under Gade, and O'Meara is helping him. Tim O'Meara runs the livery stable."

"And that's all?"

"That's just about all. You can't blame these people around here. There's been too many shootings that looked accidental and too many wild shooting scrapes between Gade men where nobody got hit—except some innocent bystander who happened to be a *hombre* who was in Jess Gade's way."

Bob Rariden was leaning across the table and keeping his voice pitched low, but Corey paid off again on the kid's courage. The kid hadn't even wanted to come back to town, he hadn't wanted to come to Gade's place and now he was in a worse jam than ever—with a sister to look out for besides himself. Yet he was laying the facts about Gade on the line while everyone else in the room was looking as though the mere mention of Jess Gade's name would cause an earthquake.

Nell Rariden was toying with her fork, but her eyes were level and unafraid. Corey pushed his chair back. "We'll get out of here as a first move worth making," he said. "Let's go."

He was conscious of the stares, the undercurrent of interest expressed in the hum of hushed voices, as he swaggered up to the wooden coop that served the cashier. He was none too sure about his next move in this one-man town, and because he wasn't sure it was a good time to swagger. A man with a strut looks like a man with an ace in the hole.

He hadn't quite reached the payoff counter when something happened that added one more complication to the strange setup Corey had stumbled into. A broad-shouldered, medium-high husky in a black sombrero lurched against him, apparently by accident.

"Pardon me to hell," he said foggily. "M'foot slipped." He seemed to be struggling for balance and grabbed Corey hard for support. Corey tensed, in wait for a trick, and the man's voice reached his ear in a ghost of a whisper that was astonishingly clear. "Loading pens. Fifteen minutes. Meet me."

It was all the happening of a second. The man straightened, jerked his sombrero straight, and with the exaggerated dignity of a drunk, made his way to the door. Corey didn't look after him.

If the man was on the level and a friend, then to look would be to betray—because the man assuredly wasn't drunk.

Corey laid his five dollars on the cashier's counter and waited for the change. The hard-faced man behind the counter pushed it back. "On the house," he said wearily. "A guy always gets fed before the hanging."

Corey's chin jutted and he pushed the bill forward again. "Take your three bucks, *hombre*," he said. "I haven't any credit here and there ain't going to be a hanging."

"That's your opinion."

The man made change, shoved two silver dollars at Corey and shrugged.

Corey picked them up. As a goat-getting system, the town was organized. He felt no chills and fever over it. They were getting him mad. He was wondering about the man in the black sombrero. There might be a lead there to a play that would spike the Gade system; spike it long enough, anyway, to let him get out of the town without crawling. There was only one thing that would make the man a friend—if the man were an enemy of Gade's. There was no sense to anyone tying up to Tex Corey for his own sake. Tex Corey looked like a losing horse at the minute and a terribly bad bet for anybody's money. He turned to the Raridens.

They were out on the drag again, out in the noise and the bustle and the loud confusion. Nell Rariden was less sure of herself, a little more frightened. Bob Rariden was trying to keep his thin jaw hard.

"If they want us out, they can stage something anywhere along here," he said. "You don't know the town."

"I know enough to stick to the spots where it's hard to pull a raw play. There's an awful big crowd on the street, kid."

He was thinking desperately. He couldn't admit to these kids that he didn't know what the next play would be, and he didn't like to admit to himself that he wasn't even sure of the truth of what he just said. He was going to go to the loading pens to meet a stranger in a black sombrero. If the man were a decoy and the date a trick, he wouldn't be coming back, but he had the problem of putting the Raridens someplace first. He could handle himself better alone.

"How much was your eating house worth, kid?"

He threw the question to make conversation, to steady the kids with some other thought than the immediate danger. Bob

Rariden looked startled. He considered.

"Gosh. I don't know," he said. "We had about a thousand dollars when the Slash W bought out our stuff at the ranch. But the eating place wasn't worth that. Five hundred, maybe, if they'd let us alone."

COREY nodded. He sniffed danger in the air suddenly as he saw the gray, sharp-faced, lath-like man who was striding down the drag toward them. There was authority written all over the man, and there was a star on his flapping vest. Behind him strode a blue-jowled man of the short, close-coupled, tight-lipped breed. With the two walked trouble. When they were within six feet of Corey, the man with the badge slowed. The blue-jowled man dropped his hand to his holstered gun.

"I've got a warrant here for the arrest of Bob Rariden," he announced. "Deadly assault on the person o' one Pancho. Do ye surrender peaceably or not?" The sheriff wasn't looking at Corey. He had his eyes fixed on young Rariden. The blue-jowled man, however, was watching Corey. Bob Rariden looked startled.

"Me? I—"

"He wasn't the one that slugged that big greaser. I was." Corey's fists bunched as he spoke. The sheriff threw a very wary side glance at him out of watery, colorless eyes.

"This here warrant is sworn to," he said, "and it's all regular and proper. It says Bob Rariden. I don't know a thing about you."

The blue-faced man hadn't moved, but there was menace in him. Corey's fists relaxed. He had had a theory about the safety of numbers on the drag, but the sheriff had that problem all solved. Tex need only make one move toward resisting an officer, and the blue-faced man would start throwing lead. The warrant for Bob Rariden was, of course, a raw

frameup. He looked around desperately. Bob's chin was up, and there wasn't even a memory of the frightened kid that he had been. He was the type that works best under pressure. His sister was clinging to his arm and he was patting her hand.

"Stay out, Tex," Bob said. "They can make a frame stick and they've got this one loaded. Won't do us no good to steam up now."

"Ye coming peaceably?" The sheriff was standing in a stoop-shouldered crouch and he had the permanently sour expression of a man who has waged a losing fight with indigestion. Bob Rariden's thin shoulders straightened.

"Yes," he said. He whispered something hurriedly to his sister, patted her hand once more, and stepped clear with his hands up. "No gun," he said.

Tex Corey's eyes were hot pools, and he could feel his blood surging angrily. The wordless, blue-jowled man was waiting grimly, showing Tex that it was no time to act upon impulse. Tex could only play waiting cards, stand back and let the lean old buzzard of a sheriff take the kid to whom he had promised protection and sock him into Jess Gade's jail. Corey's face burned with the shame of it, but this was a time when the best that he could do was—nothing. He stepped to Nell Rariden's side.

"We'll get him out," he said quietly.

There was a quiver on her lips and her eyes were moist with tears held in check. "We've got to get him out," she said. "We've got to!"

They were leading Bob Rariden away, and the blue-jowled man seemed disappointed as he dropped his hand from his gun. Bob Rariden did not look back. Tex Corey found his voice somewhere and it was cracked when he found it.

"Where's this Judge Wilson?" he asked grimly. "I've got to see him."

"That's my job." There was a catch in

Nell Rariden's voice, too. They were walking along the drag together. The sheriff and his deputy had their crowd of curious followers, and it was doubtful if anything serious could happen to the kid for a while.

"It's a job we'll do together, then. I got him into that mess."

She shook her head. "You don't know Judge Wilson. I'd go it better alone. He's suspicious of strangers."

Tex frowned. There was more to this Judge Wilson business than appeared on the surface. Neither of the Raridens apparently, had gone to the judge for anything while things were tough for them and they were under orders to get out of town. The girl was going now only out of sheer necessity. Tex Corey lifted his Stetson with one hand and scratched his head thoughtfully with the curved fingers.

"I can't leave you alone in this town," he said. "I'm responsible for your brother. That's bad enough."

She snapped her fingers like a man. "I'm safer alone," she said, "than with either Bob or you. I'll meet you here in an hour."

Like her brother, she came up to scratch best when the play was toughest. She had her chin high now and she was as straight as a soldier. If she was shedding tears, she was shedding them inside, where they wouldn't show. Tex Corey nodded.

"I'll be here in an hour," he agreed.

He watched her trim figure down the street and he pulled his Stetson brim low with a savage jerk. "She can have her Judge Wilson," he said half aloud, "and seeing him may keep her out of mischief. But I'm riding the winners. I'm going to see Jess Gade."

JESS GADE sat at ease behind his big desk and pared his fingernails while Corey talked. The lean-faced bodyguard stood between Corey and the door, his arms folded, eyes sleepy. Corey's lips

were a hard, straight line. He spoke out.

"You know as well as I know," he said, "that the kid never slugged your big gorilla. You'd look silly in court stacking that skinny kid up and saying that he did."

"Who said anything about court?" Gade raised his cold eyes briefly and Corey felt the spell of them once more as he had when he first encountered them.

"You arrested him," he said.

"I didn't. The sheriff did," Gade insisted. "I didn't see Pancho slugged, either. Maybe the kid did it. If he's a desperate character, he may try to escape."

The chill eyes completed that statement. Bob Rariden was under the threat of a Mexican verdict. Gade had something in mind, perhaps Nell Rariden, and Bob was a hostage. Unless Gade got what he wanted, Bob would be let run some night and he'd be shot running. Prisoners who were shot escaping embarrassed nobody in court and told no tales.

"What's your deal?" Corey stared across the desk grimly. Gade waved his dainty penknife.

"No deal with you," he said. "I had a deal for you once. Not now. I'm not interested in you. I can buy your kind cheap—complete with guns."

"After you've got them cheap, what have you got?"

Corey was mad and his temper flared. The flareup seemed to amuse Gade. He waved his hand again. "Lads like Frenchy," he said.

Frenchy grinned and for a moment he was off guard. A hunch flashed in Corey's brain and he acted with the flash. He spun and swung. Frenchy, who was a gunfighter, had not been taking his role too seriously in a room with a gunless man. Corey's weighted fist crashed against his jaw.

Gade was out of his chair before Frenchy hit the floor and there was a deringer leaping from his cuff. He caught

the derringer neatly as Corey turned instinctively on the balls of his feet. There was cold death in the eyes of Bannock's boss as he stared down the tiny belly-gun and Corey was never closer to eternity in his life. He grinned into the gun.

"Lads like Frenchy," Tex repeated. "It's still 'what-have-you-got'!"

His life hung there on a thread, an impulse in the brain of Jess Gade. And Gade lowered the gun.

"All right," he said. "You've got more nerve than I gave you credit for, and you didn't get as old as you are in the clothes you're wearing without knowing how to use a gun. I'll give you the proposition that you wouldn't listen to a while ago. Join up with me and take orders as you get them. Don't join up and see what happens."

Corey straightened slowly. "I reckon that I'll see what happens," he said.

They dueled silently with their wills. Corey could hear Frenchy getting up off the floor. His spine crawled with the expectation of a bullet, but he kept his eyes on Gade. Jess Gade shrugged. He lighted a cigarette and turned, suddenly thoughtful. He looked at the cigarette tip rather than at Tex Corey.

"If that's how you want it," he said, "that's how you'll get it. But take a tip. Go to my enemies while you're able to go. Mack Wilson ought to be able to use you, and if you want to find Mack Wilson, see Tim O'Meara at his livery stable."

He stood up, waved a signal that sent Frenchy's gun back into its holster and nodded toward the door. "*Vamos!*" he said.

Corey felt like saying thanks. He was walking out with his life when he hadn't figured to leave the room under his own power. Moreover, Gade had given him a straight steer about his enemies. The Raridens had named Judge Wilson and Tim O'Meara as the only ones organized against Gade. Jess Gade was sending

Corey out of an iron-clad trap to those two men. Why?

The feeling of strong undercurrents was present in Bannock. A man didn't have to be a heavy thinker to figure out the fact that neither the Raridens nor Tex Corey could be very important to a man like Gade, who practically owned the town. Yet Jess Gade had spent time and effort on Tex Corey for some reason instead of having the Gade-owned sheriff jail him or Gade-controlled roughnecks knock him over.

I can't figure it, he thought, but I ain't a figuring type. It ain't sensible to do what Gade tells me to do, but I reckon that this Judge Mack Wilson is the man I want to see.

He was shaking his head solemnly as he walked the drag. He had been in his share of jams, but this one copped the prize. He was into something up to his neck, and his life was in the middle, like a blue chip, but he couldn't see where he figured to win anything if he won. He'd moved right into a tough game without having a stake to play for—and now he couldn't get out.

He saw the livery stable ahead and quickened his stride. There was a stout, red-cheeked man sitting in the doorway with a pipe in his mouth. His impersonal gray eyes swept over Corey. There was no expression, friendly or otherwise, on his face, but it was a face that was made to mirror emotion.

"I'm looking for Tim O'Meara."

"You're looking at him." The man's voice was as impersonal as his eyes. "What can I do for you?"

"The name's Corey. Gade's sheriff slapped a friend of mine in jail for something that I did. I want to get the kid out."

"I'm not running the jail. Tell the sheriff." O'Meara was not hostile, he was merely blunt. Corey took him as he was.

"You know how much good that would

do," he said. "I went to Gade. He sent me to you. The idea is that you'll send me to Judge Wilson."

Tim O'Meara sat up straight and tapped the tobacco from his pipe. "Tell me about this," he said.

Corey told him. He started with the scene in the Silver Dollar and worked down the line. "That's how it is," he said, "and I've got to get that kid out of the calaboose before something happens to him."

O'Meara's gray eyes appraised him shrewdly. "You're maybe a damned liar," he said, "and no offense meant if you aren't one—or there's more in this than meets the eye. I'm not the one to say. You'll find Judge Wilson's place a square to your left from the next corner. It's a red brick building and there aren't many such in Bannock." He put the pipe in his pocket and stood up.

"If ye're an honest man," he said, "Mack Wilson's the man you want. If your tongue's not straight, stay away from him. Ye won't fool him a mite."

Corey turned. "Thanks," he said. "That's all I want to know."

He removed his Stetson and scratched his head thoughtfully as he stretched his legs for the red house of Judge Mack Wilson. He was getting into deep water mentally. Gade's advice was still stacking up and he was impressed with Tim O'Meara. O'Meara was the blunt yet cautious type of Irishman, and not the type of man to be engaged in any shadow boxing or sham fights. The suspicion that Gade's enemies might be owned by Gade and kept in action as a front was just about settled. Corey didn't entertain that notion any longer.

And he still had no gun.

Corey hitched his strangely light belt. He'd been told to get a gun, and there was evidence to support the notion that he'd need one, but in a country where guns are taken for granted, he didn't have

an idea of how to get one. He had two dollars and no friends.

Moreover, he had slugged two tough gun-toters, Frenchy and the Mex called Pancho. As long as he remained in Bannock, there would be death in the very air



NELL RARIDEN

that he breathed. Men who live off their reputations as gunmen cannot afford to overlook affronts to their dignity and their hardness.

HE HAD the swagger back in his walk by the time he reached the red brick house. Judge Wilson himself opened the door; a short, dark, wiry man with nervous hands and eyes that jabbed rather than hit. He had his hand in his pocket and the outline of a gun showed through the fabric. Corey made a wide-open gesture with his own hands.

"No gun," he said. "I merely want to palaver."

"Come in." Mack Wilson's voice had a deep-chested quality that was suggestive of platform speaking. He kept his hand in the pocket with the gun. Tex had been debating mentally whether to stand alone or to mention Nell Rariden. He hadn't

been able to make up his mind while he was just thinking; acting on impulse, it became no problem at all.

"Miss Rariden's probably told you part of the story," he said.

Mack Wilson's eyes narrowed slightly.

"Miss Rariden?"

"Didn't she just come to see you?"

"No one has been here this evening."

The Judge's grip on the gun in his pocket seemed to tighten. His eyes were definitely suspicious. Corey shook his head.

Through the welter of confused thought in his mind, he felt sudden fear for Nell Rariden. He had doubted the wisdom of letting her fare forth alone, and now he knew that his doubts had been justified. She hadn't been better off without the company of marked men, because she had been marked herself. If she hadn't reached Judge Wilson, then something had happened to her on the way—the arithmetic of the situation was as simple as that. And mention of a person who hadn't shown up—particularly of a woman that hadn't shown up—was enough to make Mack Wilson fearful of a frameup. They had entered a shelf-lined room that was all but filled with books. They were both still standing. Corey reached for a chair and sat down without asking for permission.

He knew that a seated man always looks less dangerous, and he was recalling the fact that Nell Rariden had mentioned Wilson's aversion to strangers. In a town like this, where he was one man against a system, Wilson probably had to be careful. Corey settled into the chair.

"You better hear my story," he said. "Maybe you can understand it better than I can."

Mack Wilson sat down reluctantly. "Be brief, please," he said. His hand remained in his pocket.

He listened gravely, then, while Corey told again of his arrival in Bannock, his eyes fixing themselves in a disconcerting

stare, dropping away and darting back again to Corey's face. When Corey finished his recital with the statement of Jess Gade's advice to go to Judge Wilson through Tim O'Meara, Wilson's forehead creased into a frown of intense concentration.

"He considered you an enemy and he warned you to get a gun—then he sent you to me?"

The Judge seemed to be struggling with the implications of that situation for several seconds, then he removed his hand from the gun pocket. "Your story is incredible," he said, "but I believe it. A man has to know Bannock to believe it. The town is incredible. The situation in the town is incredible."

He got up out of his chair and paced up and down like a platform speaker, punctuating his speech with gestures. "I'll do what I can to free young Rariden," he went on. "I don't know what can be done. Tom Beeler is Gade's sheriff, and he runs things just about the way that Gade wants them run. It's a scandal to the state. I've gone personally to the capital before, and I've tried to get the interest of the governor. We need martial law in here. The county has no control over its lawless elements. The courts are a joke."

He stopped short and jabbed one finger at Corey. "Young men like yourself can be a help, can be the salvation of Bannock. If the state won't help us, we can set ourselves up against boss rule and end it. If necessary, we can fight fire with fire."

Tex Corey stirred uneasily. He could understand now why Bob Rariden hadn't taken his troubles to Judge Wilson. The man didn't talk to a man, he orated at him. And Tex Corey wasn't a bit interested in a bigger and a better Bannock. He wanted to get the Raridens to safety and lined out, he wanted to get out of town with his skin intact—and he asked nothing else from Bannock. After all, he

owned a hardware store in Kansas City and he had a bunk in a bunkhouse on the Flying K. He couldn't see Bannock as an opportunity. He shook his head.

"I'm a peaceable man, Judge," he said. "I never hired out for fighting wages, and—"

Something in Wilson's stabbing eyes stopped him. The man was grinding his clenched fists into his hips, standing still for once, with his legs spread. "You don't like the way your friends are being treated here," he said, "but you don't want to fight about it. Whose fight is it?"

Tex Corey flushed. He hadn't thought of it that way. Mack Wilson was stabbing with his forefinger again. "You're all alike," he said, "every damned one of you. You leave the fighting to me. I've been collecting evidence against this crooked ring down here for a year. I've got it and Jess Gade knows that I've got it—affidavits, confessions, the addresses of witnesses. I've risked my life to get it and to hold it. With some decent help, with cooperation from the governor, I can use what I've got. I——"

He broke off suddenly and his eyes leaped, startled, beyond Tex Corey. There was a sound and Corey turned. He turned right into something that slashed at him out of the doorway and he never saw what hit him. He knew only that his feet were traveling one way and his body another. The floor came up and a curtain dropped on his brain.

CHAPTER THREE

Hanging Party

TEX COREY came back to consciousness with a jerk that was as abrupt as the blow that had knocked him out. The shooting stab of agony in his brain almost drove him into unconsciousness again. He was lying on his face and he pushed himself up from the carpet with

an effort that brought the sweat out on his body. Somebody cursed at him and he looked up.

Tim O'Meara was shaking his fist at him and a stranger was holding O'Meara back. The livery stable man was almost sobbing in his rage. "You dirty bush-whacking murderer!"

He was all but helpless in his rage, the grip of the other man preventing him from giving violent vent to it. Corey blinked. The room was crowded with a miscellaneous collection of men from the streets outside; punchers who had ridden in with the cattle, townspeople, nesters. The lean, sourfaced sheriff was standing with his hands on his hips in a little cleared space.

In the middle of that space lay the body of Mack Wilson.

There was a pool of blood around the body and the outstretched hand gripped a Colt forty-five. Along the barrel of the Colt was a streak of blood. Corey felt his head gingerly. It was murderously sore, and his fingers came away wet. His eyes went dazedly around the room and he read the verdict in the eyes that looked stonily at him.

Judge Mack Wilson was dead and the barrel of his gun said that he had struck Tex Corey down before he died.

The beautiful simplicity of it was a shock. Tex Corey's brain cleared as though an ice-water sponge had been passed over it. He was wondering now why he had not seen the frameup from the start. Mack Wilson was a menace to Jess Gade, and Gade didn't want the governor's troops to clean up Bannock. Mack Wilson hadn't been as brave as he pretended. He was figuring on the fact that Gade wouldn't dare remove him. Wilson's death would bring the very thing that Gade feared.

But now, it wouldn't.

Judge Mack Wilson had been murdered, but the sheriff had caught the mur-

derer redhanded and the room was full of witnesses to the damning evidence. There was no mystery, no excuse for state investigation. The county authorities had the situation well in hand.

Tex Corey was the goat. He had been intended as the goat all along. Gade had probably been waiting for a likely prospect who looked hard and who had no backing. If Tex Corey had joined the gang, the result would have been the same. He'd have been given an innocent looking job that would have walked him into the same frameup. It had been there waiting for the right man.

"I was talking to him. Somebody knocked me out from behind. I didn't see him killed. . . ."

He forced the words out. He had to voice his defense, even when he didn't expect to be believed. The stony faces and the cold, hostile faces showed that he wasn't believed. Outside, he could hear the noisy movement of people who were not able to get into the house. The lean sheriff was looking at him grimly.

"You're under arrest," he said dryly, "for the murder of Judge Mack Wilson. Anything that you say will be used against you."

He was a great stickler for rules and forms, this sheriff. Corey was standing a little unsteadily on shaky legs. He didn't try to answer. He merely nodded—and the nod shook the sparks of agony in his brain. The sheriff let his eyes range around the crowd while his blue-jowled deputy stepped up beside Corey and gripped his wrist.

"The law will take care of this feller all right," he said. "I don't want no mob violence. I ain't a-goin' to stand for none."

Corey's throat felt a little dry. He hadn't got around to thinking about that yet, but it was an angle. Judge Wilson had probably been pretty popular, and a crowd that would be pretty much piped down if a Gade man was accused of the

murder would give free play to its feelings if the murderer were a friendless stranger.

"Come along now!"

The blue-jowled deputy was starting him out through the crowd. Corey went without protest. He saw the second gun that the sheriff had wrapped up in a handkerchief. That would be the murder gun, the gun that he was accused of having. There was a grim jest to that. He'd wanted a gun all night, and now, when he had one given to him, it was given without the right to touch it. He had a gun. It was his gun. And it was in the hands of the sheriff.

He was fogged. He couldn't see a way out—and in the midst of his predicament, his thoughts swung to Nell Rariden. What had happened to her? If Gade's men got her, what had they done with her?

"I played hell when I flagged those kids off that train," he said bitterly.

He was stumbling across the room. The faces were a blur to him until he lifted his head and one face came sharply into focus. Standing inconspicuously and without expression just inside the door was the man in the black sombrero.

That was the last straw. Out of all the blunders of a crazy night, he had to be reminded of another now. This man had asked him to meet him beside the loading pens and Corey had forgotten. He had forgotten the very thing that might have saved him. He had needed an ally and he had passed one up. Things had happened too swiftly for him.

He was scarcely conscious of the mob through which blue jowls pushed him outside, scarcely conscious of the mutter, the rippling murmur of excitement. It beat about him like something heard in a dream.

He shook himself and spat, and when he felt the tightening of the blue-faced man's grip and the increased tension in the man, it helped his own spirits. A man

always had a chance as long as he was capable of any movement which forced another man on guard.

Behind him, the sheriff was clearing the Wilson house of curious idlers and taking official possession. Before him loomed the jail.

There was no conversation when they checked him in. The mob was packed pretty solidly about the jail, but curiosity was its principal emotion thus far. The jailer, a wizened little man with a game leg, checked him into the same cell with Bob Rariden and left him. The kid was white and nervous again. He took a look at Corey's bleeding head and his eyes darted anxiously toward the window that opened on the front of the jail.

"What happened?" he asked shortly.

"Somebody killed Mack Wilson, kid. They've got it hung hard on me." The unsteadiness of young Rariden helped to steady Corey. He felt his confidence increasing. There had to be a way out. No man could build a trap that another man couldn't open. There had to be a weak spot somewhere.

"My sister! Nell. Where is she?"

COREY looked down at his hands. "I fouled the detail there, kid. She wanted to go to Judge Wilson alone. I let her. She never got there. I'm sorry. Damned sorry, but they won't hurt her, kid. They won't dare."

He believed it himself when he said it and the belief helped. Bob Rariden believed it too, and that was a good idea. The kid was rubbing his hands together nervously.

"Nell would be like that," he said. "She always had too much courage. I—I never had enough."

"You've got plenty, kid."

Corey walked over to the barred window. He could see half of the square before the jail, and a portion of the main stem. The crowd was increasing. Word

of the murder had spread with the usual speed of such news, and the crowd was assembling from somewhere. It was a noisy, boisterous crowd that was bringing plenty of business to the saloon, but it would not take it long to develop into an ugly crowd. There were sullen elements already at work; tight-lipped men who stayed out of the saloons and who hung around the jail. These were the men who liked Mack Wilson and who really believed that Corey had killed him.

"It looks like a hanging crowd, kid."

Corey had to exert effort to control his voice. Bob Rariden rubbed the back of his hand across his forehead. "Lynching? Gosh, no! Jess Gade couldn't let that happen, Tex. It would mean troops for sure. He can't let them, Tex. There's no danger."

Bob Rariden was talking fast, using his own arguments on himself as well as on Corey. Corey was staring somberly out through the bars. He had never seen a lynching, but this looked like his idea of the beginning of one. He saw a little knot of men forming around a red-faced, rotund man and the knot grew larger by the second. Timothy O'Meara was talking—and the gift of eloquence was in the Irishman.

"Gade mightn't be able to do a damned thing about this," Tex said.

He was thinking that the town had been pent up long enough and he was remembering those unnaturally silent men in the eating house when he had socked the Mexican. Bannock hadn't had an outlet for its feelings. Bannock had been controlled too long. Now Bannock had a stranger who was outside of anyone's protection and who was hung with the murder of a leading citizen.

O'Meara was whipping them up. Corey could see and hear and feel the changing temper of the mob. The Irishman was down there with his soul in the job of firing this crowd with hatred. Corey knew

that the man was baiting them for his blood, but he felt strangely unresentful of O'Meara. O'Meara was sincere and he believed, probably, that Corey was a hired Gade killer.

The respectable element of the town and the boss-rule element were allies for once, and against them Corey stood alone.

"I'm glad that they put us in the same cell. If they crash in—" Bob Rariden clenched his fists, his thin jaw hard. Corey threw one wondering look at him.

"You stay out of it, kid!"

His mind swung on another tangent. They had put them in the same cell. It mightn't mean a thing except that there weren't very many cells and that this was the one most generally used. It might mean, too, that Gade was figuring on mob action and that he would be just as well satisfied if something happened to Bob Rariden at the same time; something for which he couldn't be held accountable. He had, after all, warned the Raridens, and that meant that something was scheduled to happen to Bob Rariden anyway. But Corey voiced none of his thoughts on the subject.

"Soldier law mightn't bother Gade a bit," he said, "with Wilson dead. If he's got hold of Wilson's papers, they wouldn't prove anything on Gade anyway. And they can't keep soldiers in a town forever."

Bob Rariden paced the cell. "Gade won't dare let the mob do anything. He won't dare."

Outside, the voice of Bannock was becoming a menacing growl. Corey fixed his eyes on O'Meara. He couldn't hear a word of that speech, but he could imagine it. The man's gestures alone had power. Corey's heart hammered.

"Gade figures the long way," he said. "He sent me to O'Meara first. Why didn't he just tell me where to find Wilson? He wanted O'Meara to see me and remember me."

He saw the Irishman's arms sweep out in a terrific gesture that was like a man hurling a heavy weight. The crowd answered with a roar, then the human tide broke.

From the box upon which the Irishman stood, they spread in all directions; men who shouted and swore—men who sent the spark of their own awakened blood lust to those groups furthest from the Irishman's voice.

Corey saw the swift scattering and swifter reforming of the mob with eyes that registered its full significance. He turned for a second toward the pacing Bob Rariden.

"Kid," he said, "they're coming!"

Out in front of the jail, Horgan, the blue-jowled deputy, faced the crowd—swearing at them, waving them back. He was joined by the sheriff, Tom Beeler, and the sheriff was gripping a gun, his shrill voice rising above the hoarse rumble of the mob-cry.

"Git on back there! Ye can't—"

A husky in a black shirt slapped his gun hand down and the crowd flowed over him. The blue-jowled man lashed out with both hands, but did not attempt to draw his gun. The forward surge of the crowd took him back against the jail as though he were a chip swirled in the backwash, and after that Corey could see nothing but the heads and shoulders of mad, unreasoning humanity bent upon his destruction. He whirled away from the window.

"Under the bunk, kid, and keep your lip buttoned. They don't want you unless you make them sore."

"I won't do it, Tex. You stuck by me and I'm backing your play."

There was a crash as the outside door went down and the roar of the crowd swept through the corridor. Corey gripped the kid's shoulder and spun him toward the bunks along the wall.

"Get under 'em, you danged fool! Out—"

side, you might be some help to me. You can't do any good here."

"I can try. I—"

"Your sister's out there someplace."

It was the last appeal as he spun the kid from him, and he knew that it had registered. Bob Rariden had to be out of this mess for Nell Rariden's sake—and Corey couldn't get out of it.

The jail corridor was choked. Corey saw the black-shirted man who had slapped the sheriff's gun down, and then he saw the red face of Tim O'Meara. Somebody had keys and the cell door clanged back. As they swarmed in, Corey swung.

He swung with his weight behind his fist and the black-shirted man went back into the wall of men behind him. Corey kept his hands up and he kept pumping. He landed three times, and then the blows came at him faster than he could send them back. He tasted the salt of his own blood in his mouth and the cell wall was rough against his shoulders.

He started one more punch, but a heavy hand caught it before it found a target. Other hands closed in, and his muscles strained against the pressure helplessly. A hairy hand slapped him.

The cry of the mob reduced then to the single phrase.

"Swing him!"

CHAPTER FOUR

Mob Law!

THE chilling cry rose full-throated about the light wagon upon which Tex Corey stood. It battered against his eardrums as the heavy fists had battered against his body in the mad, hysterical rush from the jail to the tall tree under which the wagon stood. He tried to blink the daze out of his eyes and comprehend the fact that he was going to die.

It didn't seem real, somehow, despite the coarse rope about his neck, the cutting pressure of the thongs that bound his wrists and the shakiness of the platform beneath his feet. There were three men on the light wagon with him. One of them was shaking his shoulder and cursing at him.

"Are yuh goin' tuh confess, yuh mangy, murderin' son?"

Corey spat. "Cut my hands loose and try to stay on the wagon with me, big-mouth!"

There was defiance in him, flame. If they were going to kill him, they were going to do it because they were too many for him. He wasn't going to let them outgame him, and he'd let them know to the very end that he had contempt for them because they rode their heavy odds over him.

"Swing him!"

The crowd was impatient, maddened, unreasoning. The pressure of those in back was jamming the men in front against the wagon. There was no horse between the shafts. A horse's nerves wouldn't have stood this. Grim men gripped the wagon shafts and waited for a signal from the men who stood beside Tex Corey. The man who had been shaking Corey waved his hand.

"He ain't goin' to confess!" he yelled.

"Swing him!"

The other two men jumped down out of the wagon. The man in the checked shirt gripped the noose. Grim hands fought for grips on the wagon. In a few seconds, that wagon was going to be yanked right out from under him, and Tex Corey would be left to do his rope dance alone beneath the tree. He knew it and he couldn't believe it. He'd been worse frightened at the jail in those few moments before the mob broke in to capture him.

Suddenly a .44 cracked above the heads of the crowd, and a broad-shouldered man

who had been working down close to the wagon shoved two men aside.

"Let go o' that noose, you!"

His voice carried clear through the dead space of silence that followed the crashing thunder of the report. Corey looked down and drew a deep breath. It was the man in the black sombrero.

For a split second, the sole survivor on the wagon hesitated with the noose in his hand. The easily swayed emotions of the crowd swung from mad violence to a sort of paralyzed curiosity. All of the menace remained, but it was momentarily in suspension, like a balanced weight. If the man with the noose had had the initiative to tighten it, and that would take only a finger's pressure, the crowd would have swung behind him with a roar. When he hesitated, they all hesitated—and the man in the sombrero leaped into the wagon.

With a flip of his left hand, he tore the noose out of the hands of the man in the checked shirt and his snapping wrist lifted it from Corey's neck like a deftly twirled lariat. With an almost simultaneous motion, his right hand produced a gun.

"Ranger!" he boomed. "On authority of the governor of the state! This man rates a fair and decent trial."

He had lungs, and he knew how to throw them behind his voice. It boomed out over the heads of the mob with thundering authority, and the man stood there with his legs wide apart and his chest forward; the tough, fighting symbol of the voice.

He stopped them cold. The one word "Ranger" had magic in it. It stood for more than a man; it stood for an organization and for a tradition. He was facing them all and throwing commands, and he had only his tremendous confidence in himself and in what he was. The gun meant little. The sheriff had had a drawn gun, and this mob had struck it down. Even the maddest of the crowd recognized

that this man had more than just a gun.

"I'm taking him back to the jail!"

He gripped Corey's wrist, and he would have taken him back. He'd have taken him back to the jail against the very teeth of the men who had been within split seconds of killing him, but he reckoned without one man whose guts matched his own and whose temper had blazed to the white-hot heat that is hatred.

There was a ripple in the human tide and into the circle about the wagon came Tim O'Meara.

Despite his age, he vaulted into the wagon as easily as the ranger had done—and he ignored the ranger's presence. When he raised one gnarled hand to the crowd there was an uneasy surge, a scattered cheer.

The ranger took one look at him and dropped his gun into its holster. He could shoot into the very mob itself with greater safety than he could threaten this man and he knew it. Corey felt tension in the man's grip on his wrist; nervous expectancy but not fear. Tim O'Meara threw his voice to the crowd that had stopped against the ranger's.

"Did you know that there was a ranger in the town?" he roared. "Ye did not! Nobody knew it. If he was here, what was he so quiet about?" His face was red, his eyes flashing, but he was taking his time. He knew that a mob is never snapped into action. It is led to a point, and then set afire with a phrase. He gave them the phrase. His eyes sweeping the crowd and his finger pointing back toward the ranger.

"He didn't protect Mack Wilson's life," he said, "but he's right on the job to protect Mack Wilson's murderer!"

That did it. The ranger knew it and Corey knew it. The roar that answered Tim O'Meara's voice was the full-throated roar of the aroused mob, the roar that had boomed about the jail and that had been stilled for a moment, but not stifled by

the bold play of the ranger. Against that, the ranger threw neither words nor guns. He snapped a handcuff link about Tex Corey's wrist and locked the link to his own. He stood with his legs braced then and threw the key into the crowd.

"They'll hang us together, guy, if they've got that much guts," he said.

The first two men were vaulting into the wagon and the ranger spilled them off with his feet. The wagon rocked as the mob's pressure jammed the leaders against it. Somebody caught the ranger's ankle and Corey went down with him when he went.

Somewhere out in the mob, there was a key that would open the fetters, and eventually the key would find its way to the wagon, but Corey was paying off silently on the ranger's guts once more. The man was playing desperately for the time which cools a mob's fever.

The longer they waited for the kill, the more chance of stopping them.

But they didn't need a rope. Corey was taking punishment from fists and feet. The ranger, one-handed, was fighting back and was taking punishment himself. He left his gun where it was, and Corey applauded that. The actual shedding of blood in this crowd would be the last needed touch to their fury.

THERE was another rift in the ranks of the mob. Somebody yelled that the key was coming up and the rift widened. It wasn't the key. Tom Beeler, the sour and lanky sheriff, fought his way to the platform with Horgan, his blue-jowled deputy, at his back. His face was bleeding but he had a gun in his fist—and Horgan had two.

"Hold it there! I'm backing this Ranger's play!"

His voice was lost in clamor and he was swept back against the wagon. Four or five more men struggled onto the packed wagon, and one of the wheels gave

way. There was a panic and confusion in the collapse, and the mob divided away from the milling group that was dumped to the ground.

Out of that confusion, another man made his way to the wagon clearing. With Frenchy at his back, Jess Gade lined up in the little group that already included the ranger and the sheriff, the sheriff's deputy and Tex Corey. Jess Gade's men were already scattered through the crowd, breaking it up into scattered units. Jess Gade himself yelled against the subsiding clamor.

"I'm backing the ranger's play, too. Anybody think I can't do it?"

Nobody did.

A ranger, the sheriff—and Jess Gade! It was three to draw to, but never three of a kind. Against the combination there was no mob calculated to stand. This one had started its disintegration, and the disintegration proceeded rapidly. The saloons caught boom business again as men who had stirred briefly and fiercely to the blood lust relaxed back into a mood for gossip and for wonder.

The wreck of a wagon lay in the clearing, and there was an unused rope in the wreckage. Tex Corey went back to jail.

Corey had no clear recollection of those last few minutes. The entry of the sheriff, the collapse of the wagon and the arrival of Jess Gade had all happened within split seconds, of course, but the aftermath—the clearing of a way to the jail—had taken minutes. Corey had stumbled through those moments in a high haze.

One of the mob had received a broken leg out of the wagon crash and no one who had been on the wagon was improved in the melee. Corey, who had started with a gashed head, felt now that he had made a modest start. He didn't seem to have any skin left.

"Better get washed up, guy. You're a mess."

The ranger led him to the jail wash-

basin, took a key from his pocket and unlocked the cuffs. The sheriff was watching him sourly. "I thought you threw that key away," he growled.

"That's what the mob thought." The ranger didn't even look around. "A man would be a plumb damn fool to throw away a key that locked him up to some strange buzzard."

Jess Gade was sitting on a desk and swinging his leg. He looked as dapper and as elegant as ever. "Pretty cute, aren't you, Ranger?"

"Not terribly." The ranger left Corey at the washbasin and turned around. He was pretty much the worse for wear himself. He didn't pay much attention to Jess Gade. He had his eyes fixed on the sheriff.

"I'm presenting my credentials if you want to see them, Beeler," he said. He slapped an envelope on the desk. "Because I'm taking over under the governor's authority to order in troops where the law is not being enforced."

"You're not troops," Gade said.

"It's me right now or troops tomorrow. Which do you want?" The ranger faced him, his jaw jutting. Jess Gade waved his hand toward the sheriff. Tom Beeler was squinting at the ranger's papers.

"I'm sheriff o' the county," he said. "You ain't got a speck of authority unless I ask for you to come in. There's plenty o' law in this county."

The ranger didn't argue. "I'm taking over Judge Wilson's papers till the grand jury sees them," he said.

There was electric tension in the room. No one spoke loudly and no one touched a gun, but the element of strife could not have been more strongly present if they had. The sheriff was glaring at the ranger from under heavy brows.

"I didn't see no papers at Wilson's."

"You saw them and you took them and you brought them to the jail. I watched you and I followed you. I want

those papers, Beeler," the Ranger said.

Tex Corey was momentarily forgotten. The cold water had cleared his head and although he was beginning to stiffen up, he was feeling more like himself again. He stalled around with a towel and watched drama unfold.

Jess Gade was still sitting on the desk, but his foot had stopped swinging. He was thoughtfully intent upon the clash between sheriff and ranger. Watching him, Corey remembered how Jess Gade had looked when Jess Gade was figuring him into a frame that had no out.

"If you've got any papers, Beeler, and this ranger has any authority," he said, "let him have them and make him sign for them. If the governor doesn't like your brand of law, let's see what his brand is like."

"Thanks, Gade." There was more mockery than gratitude in the ranger's speech. The sheriff looked startled, incredulous. He had his eyes fixed upon Gade as though for a secret signal. Gade merely nodded. The sheriff muttered something and walked across the room to the big iron safe in the corner. The ranger's teeth flashed briefly.

"Thanks again, Gade," he said.

Jess Gade waved his hand. "I've been backing you up all night," he said. "For a hellcat Ranger, you sure need a lot of help."

"I got a helpless streak in me that way." The ranger's eyes were following the lean form of the sheriff. Tom Beeler came to a stop before the safe, rested his hand upon the knob and reached for the combination. He stiffened a little and shook the knob. The safe door opened easily.

Even Gade seemed startled. He came suddenly to his feet. Beeler swung the door back, rummaged in the cluttered interior and whirled around, his eyes stabbing accusingly at Blue Horgan.

"Didn't you—"

"Hell, yes!" The blue-faced man seemed shaken. He came half way across the room. "I put the papers in there when you gave them to me and—"

"And you didn't lock that door?"

Horgan passed the back of his hand across his forehead. "The mob was charging the jail," he said. "I had to move fast. I don't know if—"

Tom Beeler straightened. "There ain't any papers in there now," he said grimly.

CHAPTER FIVE

Gun the Man Down!

THE empty safe stood like a symbol of suspicion in the corner of the room. There were six men in the room and there were six pairs of eyes fixed on the yawning interior. Then the ranger's eyes swept swiftly over the tense faces of the others and there was grim doubt in his expression. Gade's face was like a mask carved out of rock. Sweat shone on Blue Horgan's forehead.

"I put them papers in," Horgan repeated doggedly, "and the mob was raisin' hell and the sheriff was out there alone. I had to move fast."

"Who saw you put them in?" Gade's voice snapped.

"Nobody. Nobody saw me." Horgan shook himself. He was rocked now. He knew the importance of the papers and he knew Gade's organization.

"The whole town was in here after that," the sheriff said.

Jess Gade turned to the ranger and shrugged. "If you think anybody's lying, sweat 'em," he said. "I'm still backing your play."

The ranger yawned. "Nobody's lying, Gade," he said, "as far as I can tell. Somebody got away with those papers. Better lock up your prisoner, Sheriff. I'm taking a look around. No tellin' what I might find."

He didn't look at Tex Corey and he made no ceremony out of leaving. He just left. Sheriff Beeler seemed startled to find Corey still in the room. Gade's lip curled in astonishment.

"It's a wonder somebody didn't steal him, too," he said. "The governor's right."



TEX COREY

This county has one hell of a law department."

The sheriff said nothing. Blue Horgan was smoking a cigarette, his eyes expressionless. In a corner of the room, Frenchy LeClerc sat silently, inconspicuously, except for his eyes as much a piece of furniture as the chair in which he sat. His eyes had flame in *their depths* when he looked at Tex Corey. Frenchy wasn't forgetting that Tex had taken a poke at him. Corey shrugged. One enemy more or less didn't make much difference to him at this stage of the game.

The sheriff gestured with his thumb. "Lock him up, Blue."

Horgan nodded and Corey fell step

with him. He went back to the cell from which the mob had dragged him. Horgan locked him in without a word and went slowly back down the corridor as though it were a sound chute. Gade's voice had snarling challenge in it.

"Was that straight about those papers?"

"Straight as a string." The sheriff's voice was worry-laden. "The pressure was on us, Jess. I knowed you didn't want that guy lynched till you knew where you stood. I gave them papers to Blue Horgan because I reckoned I might be able to do something out front."

"You, Horgan! What about your story?"

"Just like I told it. I can't add to it none. Maybe I didn't lock that safe. I couldn't swear. . . ."

"Then pray!"

The deadly chill that had been in Jess Gade's eyes when first Corey saw him was in his voice now. Eighteen or twenty feet away from that voice, Corey still felt ice in his spine. Horgan's voice was a startled, half muffled cry.

"No, Boss! Not—"

The crack of a gun cut him short—a muffled, smothered sound that suggested a gun held against a pillow to deaden sound. The sheriff's protest cut shrilly through the echo.

"Jess! You didn't need to do that. Blue maybe made a mistake, but—"

"Blue made one damned big mistake." There was absolute finality in the statement as Jess Gade made it. The hushed silence which followed the statement was evidence that the finality was understood.

Tex Corey sat upon the bunk in his cell and wiped his forehead. "Gade shot him," he said dazedly to himself, "with no more chance than a rabbit. . . ."

Nothing that he had heard about Jess Gade or about Bannock seemed fantastic now. He had seen the man in action as a shrewd and ruthless mind, as a leader

whose word snapped mobs into obedience—and he had heard him in action as a cold and calculating killer. The Raridens had good reason for wanting to leave town.

He wondered about Bob Rariden. The bunch outside had been too preoccupied with their own civil war to worry about Tex Corey who was in the same room with them. It would be some time before they got around to worrying about Bob Rariden, who had never been a very important prisoner anyway.

With the shadow of immediate death temporarily lifted from him, Tex was able to think once more of others. He didn't put in words, even to himself, the fear that he felt for Nell Rariden, but he was remembering the soldierly straightness of her, the firm chin that gave the lie to her own honest fear—the eyes that had met his so trustingly, the wisps of coppery hair that escaped from under her crushed soft hat. Remembering her and fearing that something might have happened to her brought a queer tightness to his throat. His blood surged restlessly, and he rose from the bunk to go again to the corridor bars. Gade's voice came down the sound chute.

"O'Meara got those papers. He's the only one that would have thought about them with all that ruckus. He's the worst man that could have them. Wilson was a psalm-singing politician who wanted to be governor himself someday. O'Meara's just a hell raiser that don't want to be anything else."

"We can't have any more tough stuff, Jess." The Sheriff's tone was surprisingly firm. Gade swore.

"We're going to have more. The time to have it is when you have too much already. We've got to get O'Meara out of the way. We've got to get those papers back—" He broke off as the door opened to throw a question. "Anybody around, Frenchy?"

"Nobody. Nobody heard the shot."

"Good enough." Gade's voice dropped.

"If there's an escaped murderer running around town when O'Meara gets it, they can't hang that on us. O'Meara tried to get the guy hanged; the guy got revenge. Just like that!"

The sheriff's reply came at length; slow and deliberate. "This here murderer shot his way out and killed my deputy," he said. "It goes like that. Then he got O'Meara."

"That's just what happened. Bring that guy out here, Frenchy!"

Corey's spine stiffened. He had long ago given up the job of trying to think ahead of Jess Gade, and now he wasn't trying to outguess him at all. There was only one thing that he could bet on absolutely. Whatever he stepped into in the other room was bound to be tough.

Frenchy's grin confirmed his hunch. The swarty little gunman who had no love for him whatever was almost affable. "The boss wants to see you," he said. "This time you come."

"Yeah. This time I'll come," Corey agreed.

COREY walked grimly down the corridor and into the big room that was the main reception room of the jail. It was lighted by a kerosene lamp chandelier in the center of the room. The lamp swung in the draught from a broken window high in the wall and the shadows moved across Jess Gade's face. There was no other movement in his face save that of the shadows as Corey entered the room.

"I'm through with you, guy!" he said.

Corey's battered chin was up. "I was through with you long ago," he answered.

Gade looked at him. "That's nice." He nodded, slowly drew a .44, looked at it and held it low. He was half the room away from Corey, and Corey had the sheriff and Frenchy on either flank.

Even if he had had a gun, it would have been an impossible position strategically. Gade was measuring him.

"Frenchy is going to open that door in a moment," Gade said. "Then you can come into me and take it or take it going away. I don't give a damn which you do!"

Corey's eyes narrowed and he crouched slightly. His skin was crawling in anticipation of the bullet's impact and his heart was thumping. It was a long charge to Gade, and he had handled guns long enough himself to know the percentages. Gade could put at least two slugs in him before he crossed the room. He'd never reach Gade; not with two .44 slugs in him.

"Open the door, Frenchy, and take a look around." Gade instructed.

Gade sat motionless with the gun in his lap and Frenchy opened the door quietly. Corey's brain was racing. He was seeking

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an alternative where no alternative existed. He could charge the gun now while Frenchy was still checking up outside, but Gade would shoot anyway, and instinct forced him to take every last second that he could get of life.

There would probably be no one outside. The jail was isolated from the main part of town and shrouded in darkness. The lights were down on the drag where the excitement was, where ex-lynchers were drinking to their boldness and to the strange events of the night.

"All clear, Chief."

Frenchy seemed strangely happy at the idea. Gade raised the gun. "How will you have it?" he asked.

There was a whizzing sound, a shattering of glass and darkness in an instant. Corey gave a sidewise leap, spun on his hands close to the floor and dived through the door.

Somebody had crashed the lamp out. Probably Bob.

The thoughts banged through Corey's brain. Behind him a gun boomed.

The lead sang close as Corey sprinted low to the ground across the clearing. A second shot followed the first, then two close together. He staggered his run and slanted for the area behind the main stem shacks.

He was breathing gratitude to the kid for that rock that had shattered the light at just the right moment. It had taken nerve to hold the brick so long, but it might have been ineffective if thrown too soon.

Now he was running into the litter of cans and boxes and assorted junk that goes into the makeup of a cowtown's back area and he had to slow his pace. Twice he barked his shins. It hurt and it broke his stride, but he had reached the point where a few more assorted bruises made no difference whatsoever. The trouble with banging into things was the fact that it made noise.

Already the main stem was awake and whooping. It was late, and a lot of citizens had walked or staggered back to bed, but the town was never entirely asleep. Tonight it was particularly wakeful, and it needed only that fusillade to release crowds into the streets once more.

Corey slowed down and watched tensely for any sudden flashing on of lights in back windows. A sudden light would set him up on a spot for any fool to shoot at. There would be nervous trigger fingers when word spread that he had escaped.

He was thinking of the uncanny fact that Gade always had his bets covered two ways. He had planned to shoot Tex Corey as a cover for the dead deputy and to provide a smokescreen under which Tim O'Meara could be murdered. The details of his scheme had gone wrong, but the scheme itself was still intact.

He had to get to O'Meara before they did. It was his only chance. Tex was unarmed and he had to go to a blazing hot-head who'd pull down on him in an instant and who probably wouldn't listen to anything he had to say.

He ducked low as a light flashed. It was in the rear window of a house a few yards ahead of him. He hugged a dilapidated fence and backtracked slowly. Behind him, he heard a can roll under an incautious foot and his heart stopped. He turned on a slow pivot.

"Tex?"

The voice was low, hesitant, afraid. He drew his breath in hard. His heart raced again. He strained his eyes into the darkness toward the voice.

"Nell?"

He didn't believe it when he heard it, but she came to him in a swift, silent rush that was at once relieved and afraid. "Tex! I'm glad. I've been afraid for you. . . ."

He melted into the shadows along the fence with her. She gripped his arms

with trembling hands and her face was a white blur close to his own. "It's been terrible," she said.

He swallowed hard. It had been terrible for her and that somehow unnerved him. He didn't think of what had happened to himself as terrible; it was just one awfully tough session.

"Bob? Where is he? What happened to him?" he asked.

"At our place. He hurt his leg when he escaped from the jail. He can't walk."

Corey stared at her. "You threw that brick?"

"Yes. I was scared to death. I didn't know when to throw it. And I was afraid that I'd miss."

"Yeah. You were practically a coward." Corey was leading her along the fence. He was perpetually astonished at timid, scared people with nerve.

"Can we get to that place of yours from here?"

He was listening to the noise along the drag, listening with more concern to the sound of unorganized pursuit that was spreading into the back areas. Nell Rariden nodded.

"We'll keep going," she said.

BENDING low, they made good time. Corey wasn't kidding himself that he was just lucky. Gade and his sheriff, Tom Beeler, knew that Corey had headed into the area in back of the main drag, but they had probably headed pursuit into another direction. They wanted to let Tex Corey run a while. He had to be a fugitive when Tim O'Meara died.

"Here it is."

Nell Rariden gave a sigh of relief as she turned toward the dark, shabby frame building that had been her home and her business venture. In the darkness, Bob Rariden waited for them.

He was sitting with his back to the wall and one leg straight out in front of

him. Corey crouched down beside him.

"How bad is it, kid?" he said.

Bob's face gleamed sweaty white in the darkness. "I think it's broken," he whispered. "Got a cigarette?"

Nell Rariden had bent to one knee. She held Bob's hand in one of hers. Across his body, she looked at Tex Corey. Her eyes were moist, luminous; her lips were firm. Corey fumbled awkwardly in his pockets and produced a terribly mangled package of cigarettes. With a little pinching and patching, he managed a smoke for the white-faced kid. He didn't speak.

The kid had been sitting here alone and uncomplaining for hours, and the girl had been taking the risks of a hostile town. Neither one of them had uttered a complaint or a reproach. Neither had as much as mentioned the fact that it was Tex Corey and his optimism that had hauled them back into Bannock when they had turned their backs to it.

"Can you tell if it's broken?" The girl had difficulty in speaking. Corey nodded. He rose to his feet and straddled the boy's body, his legs rigid, body bent at the waist.

"Grab my legs, Kid, and push like hell," he said. "I'll have to hurt you. . . ."

He gripped Bob Rariden's leg. The youngster gave one low, smothered moan. Corey's lips twisted as he straightened his body.

"It's broken," he said.

For just a second, Nell Rariden looked as though she was going to faint. Corey gripped her and steadied her. He felt her soft warmth as he held her, and the action of his heart was a limping beat.

"I'm all right," she said. "What will we do?"

"Get a sawbones. Any decent doc, even in a town like this, will keep his mouth shut if you ask him to."

"But we have no money, and you—"

He dug around in the little change pocket of his breeches. Only one of the two silver dollars had survived the beat-

ing and the thumping and the excitement of the past hours. He took it out and pressed it into her palm.

"Give him that on account," he said gruffly. "I have to get out of here anyway."

She stared at him. "You can't."

"I have to," he insisted. "If I had a change of clothes, I could walk right past the jaspers who were trying to hang me. Mobs don't remember anything. Hardly any o' those piyutes knew what I looked like. They just wanted to have a good time and hang me."

Bob Rariden was pulling on the cigarette. His face was still twisted with pain. "I've got an old shirt and pants in the next room that I thought weren't worth taking with me."

"They'll do."

Tex Corey started toward the other room. The kid's voice stopped him. "But don't do it, Tex. You're much safer here. I can wait a while for the Doc."

"I've got to go, kid. I've stayed too long. I've got to get to Tim O'Meara. He got Mack Wilson's papers out of the sheriff's safe, and they're going to kill him for them."

The Rariden's exchanged glances briefly. Bob nodded. "Okay, Tex. You'll find those clothes in the next room. Water, too."

Tex stepped through a door into a small room that had been used to store canned goods and to wash dishes when this had been an eating house. There was a basin in the corner, and he washed carefully, plastering his hair down. The face that stared back at him from the cracked mirror above the basin was a bloody caricature of the face that he was used to shaving; a slightly lumpy, lopsided face. Water helped, and there was a sloppy old hat on the wall. He put it on and the brim shaded his face. The shirt and pants were very snug on fit, but they transformed him, and the fringe helped.

In the other room, the Raridens were talking quietly. Nell Rariden rose as he stepped into the room. She had something in her hand. Bob Rariden looked up gravely.

"Maybe you can find that ranger, Tex, and make a deal," he said. "O'Meara didn't get those papers."

"He didn't?"

"No." Bob Rariden shook his head. "He didn't, because I did."

Tex stared at him in shock.

Bob Rariden gave the statement time to soak in. He waved one hand wearily. "The safe door was partly open when I ran out of the cell after they took you out. I took the papers. I thought they might do you some good. Then I fell like a clumsy fool when I was going out the window." He winced. "That's how I got the broken leg."

Tex Corey stood staring at him. He opened his mouth twice but the words wouldn't come. All he could say when he did get his voice was, "I'll be damned!" Nell Rariden held the sheaf of papers out to him.

"You can take better care of them than we can," she said.

The evidence in the case so far didn't prove that fact to Tex Corey, but he accepted the papers and rammed them away behind his belt and under his borrowed shirt.

"I'll take care of them," he said grimly, "and thanks."

He turned toward the door and the girl stopped only to pat her brother's head. "I'm going with you," she said. "Part way, anyhow."

He was going to say no, and he remembered that his orders and his advice had been infallibly wrong so far. He remembered another fact, too, with startling suddenness.

He had never learned why Nell Rariden never reached Judge Wilson's, or where she had been.

CHAPTER SIX

Cut and Ride!

THE main stem was as crowded as at midday. There was a manhunt on, but the majority of those in Bannock preferred to let others do the hunting while they gathered in groups and discussed what had happened during a momentous day. Corey and Nell Rariden walked down the cowtrail road that paralleled the main street and they attracted no attention there.

"Why didn't you go to Wilson's?" He blurted the question out because there seemed to be no way of leading up to it. She countered bluntness with bluntness.

"The ranger headed me off."

"The ranger did?" Corey stopped.

"Yes. He'd been watching us. He said that you were going to meet him at the loading pens and that he had a plan for using all of us. He didn't want me shooting around by myself and stirring up anything."

"Did you tell him what you wanted from Wilson?" Corey's voice was a little hollow. Because he had forgotten something and because he was an impulsive fool, he had started all of the tough stuff that had happened. If he'd only met the ranger at the loading pens!

"I didn't have to tell him," the girl said quickly. "He knew. He saw Bob ar-

rested. He told me that he'd get Bob out. He told me that he was a ranger. That's all I had to know. I went to our old place and waited. I knew that Bob would come there if he got out."

It was all so simple. Corey felt like a lumbering lout. The ranger had been in town, sizing things up, filling his hand before he played. The man had been watching developments and he'd laid a plan of campaign. The man had naturally wanted to have things under control before he went to a politician like Wilson, who would want to give orders, or to a controlled sheriff like Beeler, who wouldn't take any.

"Tex, I think that you're the bravest man I ever knew."

They had stopped by common consent where the cowtrail branched to run across the town. There were two dark buildings shielding them from the main street, and a vast night shielding them from the realities of death and injury and the brutality of the manhunt. Tex Corey flushed.

"I'm a clumsy bum," he said.

Inwardly he cursed. Even his tongue was clumsy. It was not the kind of a thing that a man said to a girl with whom he had faced—and was facing—danger, not the kind of a reply that a man makes when the stars hang low and a girl speaks a compliment. She looked at him gravely and in that moment she was older than he and she knew it. She extended her hand.



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"Good luck, Tex," she said.

He gripped it as he would grip a man's. There were things that he wanted to say, things that he wanted to tell her, ideas that he had about courage and about timid people who were bravest when they were most frightened. He wanted to speak and he couldn't. He gripped her hand and only his eyes were eloquent.

"I'll come back," he said.

He was walking toward the drag and he felt no fear. He felt a tight sense of expectancy but it was not dread. A pair of eyes, sharper than he expected to encounter might see him and recognize the battered face beneath the sloppy old hat. It would be like a clap of thunder, such an identification, and it would be swift doom. He plodded on.

He could almost see Slim's grin, Slim being amused at his appearance, and it cheered him. Slim and the life that he represented seemed a million miles in the past. Yet Slim was probably sleeping like a baby in a stinking, jolting cattle train, and if Corey could suddenly join that train by some miracle and tell Slim what had happened, Slim wouldn't even raise his head to spit. He'd just roll over and grunt, "Yuh damned liar," and go back to sleep.

Corey was elbowing through the crowd. He had to rub shoulders with men who had been trying to hang him a while back and he had to shove them out of his way, and a few times he even threw retorts to the badinage about his hurry. And the men who were talking and wondering about a fugitive who might be miles away did not look for him along the main drag of Bannock.

O'Meara's livery stable was dead ahead on a dark side street. Downstairs the big double doors were drawn. The shutters were closed on the upper floor, but thin lines of light shone through. Corey's jaw squared.

If he knew where to find the ranger,

he'd rather talk to him. Gade's men hadn't yet gotten to O'Meara, or there'd have been some excitement. They had probably delayed to see if they could locate Corey and make certain that Corey had no alibi established. That was a break.

But if the old coot won't listen to me? Won't believe me?

Corey ran his hand along his thigh regretfully. If he only had a gun, he could ram the drop to O'Meara and make him listen. As it was, he wouldn't lay any bets on the temper of O'Meara. The man was capable of shooting first and finding out what Tex Corey wanted later.

Corey's eyes flashed up and down the street and he cut away from the board sidewalk across a cleared space to the left of the livery stable. He could go in the back way if he were careful and—

Three muffled shots came from within the building.

FOR a paralyzed fraction of a second, Corey stood crouched; then he whirled and made a quick leap for the shadows behind O'Meara's. Instinct was guiding him. Back the way he had come, he would be heading into the crowds along the main stem and coming away from the shots toward anybody who heard them—moving against the light, a target for anybody at O'Meara's. That way was fatal. He had to pass O'Meara's and keep going.

His heart was somersaulting. The ill luck that had ridden the night to him was still in the saddle. He was late and the Gade gang had gotten to O'Meara. He was worse than late; he was practically on the spot where Gade wanted him to be. A fugitive from the charge of murder, framed with the killing of a deputy in his escape, he was practically on the ground for a third murder that could be more easily laid to him than any of the others.

He faded to the ground fast out of the path of a racing man, who all but ran him

down without seeing him. He was close enough to launch himself into a sprinting tackle that would bring the man to earth, but he thought it better to stay in hiding.

The man was probably the murderer of O'Meara, but it was neither the time nor the place for Tex Corey to be catching murderers. After the charge and the leap and the struggle on the ground, he'd have a man on his hands and a crowd grouped around him—and it would be the word of one man against another. Tex Corey's lip curled. The word of the lowest halfbreed in Bannock would stand against Tex Corey's tonight.

The shadows of the alley swallowed the runner, and Tex Corey changed direction. The man was running directly away from the main street, and it was the direction that Corey wanted—but it was as fatal for him now as Main Street itself. Let the other man hear Corey on his trail, as he was bound to do, and he'd do one of two things. He would lead Corey into a trap where his accomplices waited, or he'd shoot it out.

Corey rubbed his thigh ruefully. He'd gamble gun for gun with the average smoke-slinger to be found in the tough towns, but he needed a gun for a starter.

He had only one alternative and a bad one. He took it, with instinct driving him again. There was a slash between O'Meara's house and a big, dark, barn-like structure next to it, a narrow areaway that led toward the street on the side above the house and away from the main stem. The street was pocket-black at this end and narrow. He could cross it in two or three leaps and be heading back through the town by another set of back alleys.

It was risky, but it was better than being driven into the open, where he would be anybody's target.

The action had been continuous, flowing, happening in a fraction of a second. Corey's thoughts had raced with the ac-

tion and he was not conscious of thought. He was making his decision, seemingly, with his muscles, whirling toward the areaway, racing down it with long balanced strides that cut noise to the minimum.

He pulled up short and cursed.

The areaway was blind. Dead ahead of him, the two buildings joined behind a false front that towered too high and too straight for climbing. The darkness that he had counted upon as an ally had proved a betrayer. He had not been able to see that barricade from the mouth of the slash. He had expected darkness at the other end, but not the darkness of a barrier like this one.

He raced back, conscious of precious time lost, expecting the uproar that should follow shooting on a night like this; racing back to his bad alternatives, the route to the main stem or the trail of the man who had fled. Instinct wasn't functioning yet. He didn't know which way he would turn when he dashed back out of the areaway.

He never found out.

He was running low to the ground and he slowed before he left the dark canyon between the buildings. A spoonful of sand grated under one foot and a blocky shadow stepped across his path. His hand came up instinctively in a gesture of defense and remained up when he caught the glint of a gun barrel.

"That's it. Hold it!"

The voice behind the gun was grim, cold, pitched low. It was the voice of a man who doesn't stand for having anyone jump a gun that he holds. Corey came to a stop, and his right hand followed his left in reaching for the sky. The man behind the gun stepped forward and his gun rested just under Corey's heart.

"You!" he grunted. "So you were the one who got away."

Corey's eyes returned his stare bleakly. There wasn't much that he could say

against the weight of the evidence. He had been captured in the shadow of a murder by the ranger who was about the only man in town who might otherwise have believed in him.

THERE was disappointment in the ranger's voice, as he said, "You had me believing in you for a while, guy!" He had turned Corey around and was leading him up the O'Meara back stairs. Corey stopped, careless of the gun pressure against his spine.

"Why not keep it up for a while?" he suggested.

"I'd have to hear a damned good story. What have you got to offer?"

For a man on a murder scene, the ranger was exceptionally cool, unhurried. Corey remembered what the man had said. "So you were the one who got away?" There had evidently been someone who hadn't escaped. Perhaps the ranger had sufficient reason to be cool. Corey's shoulders stiffened.

"I'm putting my hand inside my shirt," he said. "I haven't got a gun."

"You hadn't better have a gun. You couldn't turn fast enough to use it."

They had stopped on a landing midway up the stairs. Corey reached reluctantly beneath his shirt and drew out the papers of Mack Wilson. If the ranger believed that O'Meara had had those papers, this was hanging evidence, but Corey could not hope to keep those papers hidden nor to dispose of them in any way before they were found on him. He had to make a play and stand on it.

"Believe it or don't," he said, "but I was taking those papers to the governor if I didn't find you and I could get out of here. They're Mack Wilson's."

"Let me have them!"

The ranger's voice was suddenly sharp, excited. His attitude of cool wariness dropped from him in a flash. He reached under Corey's armpit and took the papers

eagerly. For just that interval of time that is often fatal, the gun pressure relaxed against Corey's spine—and they were standing on the stairs.

Corey had an impulse. His chance of dropping and of hitting the ranger's legs as he dropped was good. They would bounce down those stairs fast and the chance of a man with a gun was no better in a melee like that than the chance of a man without a gun. He shook his head.

So far he had stayed inside the law, no matter how it looked. The ranger had played the game straight with him and he was playing it back. The gun prodded again and the moment, with its temptation, was gone.

"Let's go upstairs."

The ranger was in full command of the situation once more. Corey was marveling at the fact that there was no excitement. The shooting could not have been heard on the main stem or there would be a furore out front. He remembered how muffled the shots had sounded to him, and he had been close. O'Meara's house was solidly built and it was tightly shuttered. It was noisy down on the drag tonight. . . .

They had reached the stairhead, and the ranger shoved Corey ahead of him. "Open the door," he said. "Slow and careful."

Corey was both slow and careful. He stepped into a high-ceilinged room that was lighted by a huge, ornate oil lamp that perched on a center table; a room that was a regular storehouse of monstrosously big furniture. There was even a piano which O'Meara had once bought cheap from a poverty stricken nester, for the daughter that O'Meara had some day hoped to have.

At the far end of the room stood O'Meara.

Corey felt his knees buckle. It was like seeing a ghost. He had counted the man as dead when he heard the shots. He had

heard the man's murder planned and he had figured himself as the sole chance that O'Meara had of surviving the night. Seeing the red-faced, snarling Irishman standing there was like a right hand jolt to the jaw.

"Him! I knew ye'd find him in it!"

There was rage in O'Meara's purpling face, hot hatred in his eyes. He took a step forward, his fists knotted. The ranger grunted.

"Sit down, Tim," he said quietly. "He had Mack Wilson's papers on him, and you know that he didn't get them from Mack Wilson. Let's try and be sensible about this. Sit down, guy."

He waved Corey carelessly to a chair, but the chair was a big one that no man could leave in a hurry and the chair was where the ranger could face it when he talked to O'Meara. O'Meara's fists unknotted slowly, but he didn't speak.

"Those papers—"

The ranger broke off short. His raised hand commanded the silence of O'Meara and of Tex Corey. The front door had opened and there was a thump of hurrying feet on the stairs. The ranger faded back against the wall, where he was out of sight of the doorway. Corey hesitated only a fractional second in deciding that he didn't like a big, high-armed, stuffed chair as a grand stand seat for trouble. He risked the ranger's wrath and Tim O'Meara's temper by bending forward like a jack-knife and rolling out of the chair. Neither of the two men paid any attention to him, and he crouched against the floor.

THE door slapped open and Sheriff Tom Beeler came into the room, his lean, cadaverous body bent at the waist, his eyes narrowed. Behind him came Frenchy LeClerc with a shiny new deputy star on his chest. Gade, evidently, had not taken any more chances of blundering in the sheriff's office. He had

given the office the best he could muster.

Two steps into the room, Tom Beeler stopped abruptly, so abruptly that Frenchy ran into him and dropped back into a crouch like a startled cat. The sheriff's normally squinted eyes were suddenly wide. He stared at Tim O'Meara, and his



JESS GADE

eyes jumped to something that Corey had not previously noticed—a grimly suggestive heap on the floor that was covered loosely with a blanket.

"Looking for something, sheriff?"

The ranger's voice came out of the shadows in the room corner. Beeler turned, his watery eyes blinking. Frenchy took two catlike steps in reverse and rested his shoulders against the edge of the open door. The sheriff made a swal-

lowing motion with his mouth and his Adam's apple made a round trip up and down his thin neck.

"I thought I heard shots," he said.

"You're about the only one that did."

The ranger took a step into the room. He was dirty and roughed-up, and his face was incredibly grim. "As a matter of fact, Sheriff, you didn't hear any shots. You were working on a time schedule. You came up here to find Tim O'Meara's body."

"You're crazy!" The sheriff tried to put conviction in his tone and failed. His eyes darted once more from the savage face of O'Meara to the covered heap on the floor. The ranger nodded.

"That's one of Gade's men," he said.

"I shot him. The jig's up, Beeler. You've played in with these crooks too long. I'll take your gun and badge—now!"

He took one more step. Frenchy's voice was a sudden snarl. "Don't be a dam' fool, Tom—"

He drew and fired as he spoke, but he was using the sheriff's body as a shield. Tom Beeler was a little slow, but his gun cleared. The ranger fired twice and from across the room the big gun of Tim O'Meara entered the duel.

The sheriff stretched to the limits of his lean frame, spun once toward the ranger and crashed into the table as he fell. Corey crawled crablike out of the sudden shower of burning oil from the lamp and came to his feet against the front windows.

Another shot sounded out there in the stairwell, where the ranger was plunging down the stairs after the fleeing Frenchy. Tim O'Meara made a stamping motion at the blaze, saw that he didn't have a chance of putting it out, and turned with his gun gripped hard, his face a twisted mask in the lurid glare.

Corey didn't wait for Tim O'Meara to fight it out with temptation. The window behind him was up and there was only the drawn shutter between him and the

open air. He took the drop in a second.

The flame leaped after him with the sudden draught, and he felt the hot breath blowing on him for just an instant, then he was going down. He hit with his knees bent and let his weight fall forward, checking the fall with his fingertips.

Men were running toward O'Meara's from all directions now, but there was no one close. Frenchy sprinted swiftly across the street and hit into the back area route toward the heart of the town. The ranger took two steps after him, looked back at the swiftly blazing building and turned with a curse. Corey breathed deep.

It will have to be me for Frenchy, he thought.

He was tired and he was suddenly conscious that he was a walking ache, but he was a fugitive again and there would not always be a fire or a heap of excitement to take attention from himself. He still had a lot to answer for, even if the third murder hadn't happened. He hit the shadows and a hand grabbed his suddenly from the darkness.

He nearly lashed out with his right, but checked the motion in time. The great torch that had been Tim O'Meara's home threw light into the back areas, and he saw the pale face of Nell Rariden behind the hand that had checked him.

"Tex! I came down because I didn't know. Anything could happen. I wanted to be near in case—"

He gripped her arms and held her tight. It was perilous for both of them to linger here, and he had work to do, but he couldn't help himself.

"Did you get a sawbones?"

"Yes. It's all right. The doctor said he'd take care of him. Bob wanted me to come."

Tex Corey looked hastily back toward the blaze, then down the cluttered back yards over which Frenchy had raced. She seemed to sense his thought.

"I'm a horsethief, too," she said. "The

man who owns the horse is drunk. He fell asleep by the watering trough. The horse is saddled. I thought you might need him. You could—"

He looked down into her eyes. She thought of so many more things than he did. "Listen," he said, "can you ride?"

"Like a man." There was no boast; it was a statement. He released his grip.

"Get that animal and ride to Gade's," he said. "Maybe I'll need him."

He had everything now but a gun, and he couldn't wait on the miracle that would bring him that. The girl slipped away, and he resumed his run over the course that Frenchy had set.

Frenchy would go to Jess Gade's, and it was no time for Jess Gade to figure elaborate plans or plots or frameups. With a fire menacing a town that was built of dry wood, with Mack Wilson's papers in the ranger's pocket and with the Gade organization split wide open, it was a time for only one thing in the life of a man like Jess Gade.

It was time to get out.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Death by Gunlight

BANNOCK was ablaze. The hungry flames from O'Meara's had eaten their way through the roof of the building beyond, and there was an artificial sunset glow against the sky. Men were rushing toward the conflagration and several volunteer fire companies had already been organized within the space of five minutes; hastily formed groups of men willing to haul water or wield axes.

Politics and murder had to take a back seat temporarily in the face of the more immediate menace. Men rushed toward the fire. Corey moved swiftly away from it. Corey stopped short at the fence around the sizable back yard of the Silver Dollar and worked close to the gate. In-

side, saddled horses moved impatiently. Jess Gade's cold, even voice carried above the creak of saddle leather and the thudding of hoofs.

"It's one hell of a time for you to be showing up, Pancho!"

"I come right back. I saddle the horses. If that is not right, *Senor Jess*, how do I know?"

"You saddled the horses. You knew that we'd need them?"

"*Si, Senor*. I think so. When thees dam' ranger. . . ."

Corey eased forward until he could look through the gate without being seen. Pancho, the big, moonfaced husky whom he had knocked down in the Silver Dollar, was standing before Jess Gade, and there was sick horror in the man's expression. He wore guns, but there was no dream in his face of using those guns. He stood like a prisoner before the dock.

Jess Gade, still elegant in his white silk shirt, buckskin breeches and fancy boots, was standing with his hands on his hips. Behind him stood Frenchy LeClere. Gade's lips were bitter.

"The ranger! Damn the ranger! There never was a ranger that stood a chance in this town. The trouble tonight was too many lily-livered sobs without guts. You saddled horses to—"

"*Si, Senor*. H—"

"If, hell! I didn't send you out to saddle horses. I sent you out to blast that flannelmouthed Irishman out of the picture. I sent you out to get those papers!"

"I try to tell you. Thees ranger—"

"And you just ran," Gade cut in. "You knew that Beeler was going in, but you didn't head him off. You didn't do anything. You got the hell out and you saddled horses."

"*Senor Jess*. I could not—"

"Good-by, Pancho!"

Jess Gade's hand dipped and rose. It was one continuous motion and the roar of the gun blended into it. Pancho had

an infinitesimal space of time in which to see what was coming, but he died without even making a move toward his gun. He died like a slaughtered sheep, too paralyzed with fear of one man to even make a defense of his life. Jess Gade didn't even watch him fall. He spun on his heel and vaulted to the saddle.

"Let's go, Frenchy!" he snarled. "We've got to make time."

Corey faded away from the gate. He was wishing again for a gun, and he was still a little cold from the callous suddenness of Pancho's dying. The impatient horses thundered by as he crouched against the fence, and he saw them swing south away from the blaze and out of Bannock. There were loaded saddlebags that told their own story.

Men like Jess Gade, even when they rule the roost, are ready for the day of doom. There would be money in those saddlebags, plenty of it; getaway money hoarded carefully through days of power. Jess Gade might leave valuable property behind him, of necessity, but he would carry a stake that would make him important in another town. It was the fortunes of war. A man of his breed expects each town to be the last, the town that he'll rule till the pavement comes.

But riding out of town with Jess Gade was Tex Corey's last chance of vindication. He was still a murderer in Bannock, and he'd be a hunted murderer once the smoke of the big fire settled.

Inside the gate there was a gun. . . .

Corey saw the two horses become a blur to the southward, then he was through the gate and bending above the body of Pancho. Pancho had died swiftly if not easily. He was lying on his face and Corey left him as he fell. He bent above him and lifted a .44 with a black bone handle from the man's holster. He hefted it and approved it. It was balanced as a gun should be, and it had that something about it that identified it as a fighting

man's weapon and not as a mere store gun.

"It deserved to be drawn," he said.

The feel of the weapon transformed him. He begrudged the time, but on a hunch he stripped the belt and holster from Pancho. Then he straightened and looked at the horse.

Pancho had saddled horses all right, three horses.

Another horse whinnied and Corey whirled, his hand on the gun. Nell Rariden rode through the gate. She was riding, as she promised, like a man. She was riding easily, without a trace of the fatigue that she must have felt. He waved to her, a wave that indicated the mount of the fallen Pancho.

"I'm riding this one," he said. "Better leave that animal here and get back to Bob. I'll be back."

The girl edged her mount close to his as he swung to the saddle.

"Wherever you're going, I'm going with you," she insisted.

There was assurance in her, a certainty that matched his own. He was no more sure of his return to her than she was of the fact she would ride with him. She was pledging, too, and with no subtle intuitions to guide him he sensed it.

"It's dangerous," he protested. "Frenchy and Jess Gade are riding out. I've got to follow them."

"Which way did they go?"

She was stirrup to stirrup with him, and there was tension about her, a fighting man's look. He swung his arm to the south and she nodded gravely, urging her mount forward.

"They'll try to cut through Farland," she said, "and out of the state. I know a shortcut." She spurred ahead.

BANNOCK was in a shallow saucer set in the hills, with wide rolling range country to the north and the foothills to the south. The road was

scarcely out of town before it started to climb, turning on itself like a carelessly thrown lariat.

Nell Rariden rode in the lead, and she asked no favors for her sex. When she stated that she rode like a man, she took on a job to do; a job that she did superbly well.

After two hundred yards the road dropped again, and the hoofs of the horses clattered over a rickety bridge that spanned a dry creek. Beyond the bridge, the road slashed through poplars, and Nell Rariden turned off. She rode her bay into an apparently solid screen and found the rift that led to an Indian track, where the ponies were forced to walk slowly and single file.

She urged her mount almost straight up the side of the mountain. Corey's lips were tight watching her, but his eyes gleamed. This was riding—and with a real rider. Branches whipped his face and he could see sparks dance from the hoofs of the pony ahead.

They climbed for what seemed like years, and then Nell Rariden was outlined against the pale light of the low-hung stars atop the ridge. She was poised there for a fractional second, then she was down the other side and out of his sight.

She was reined in waiting for him and her eyes were wide. The high color of hazard was in her face. She'd been campaigner enough to get off the skyline as fast as she could.

"It's hard from here on," she said. "We go down and it's steep. We'll cut the road and we ought to get there a little ahead of them."

He nodded. "Where did you learn to ride like that?"

She tossed her head. "Even a nester can ride, sometimes."

She was gone again and he flushed as he lined out after her. She had not exaggerated when she said that it got hard. It was like riding a toboggan slide strewn

with boulders and made treacherous by shifting sand and fragments of loose rock. The ponies were cow ponies that had worked this kind of country. If they had not been, they could not have kept their feet.

Tex Corey followed blindly, and in a corner of his brain reserved for marveling about things, he was still turning over the idea that a brave person could be timid and still be brave. As far as he could tell, he was neither one thing nor another personally; he was pretty much the same way all of the time. He acted the way he felt and he felt whatever way he happened to be feeling. He marveled at anyone who was different—and he could only sense the difference.

"There!"

The wind whipped the word back to him as the girl waved. Below him he could see the narrow ribbon of road laid through jagged rock. Beyond that ribbon of trail there was the bottomless pit of the world, a drop so steep that not even the tops of the tallest trees showed. A big boulder was balanced crazily on the lip of the trail above the drop, but like most of the balanced rocks of the West, Corey knew that this one would be as solid as Gibraltar.

It was the only barrier between a rider charging down on that road and the sheer leap to wide eternity; a barrier as cruel as the drop. A man would smash against that like a fly against flat board. Between the girl and that thin strip of suspended trail there was an almost perpendicular slope that shone silver gray in the pale light. She waved and put her mount onto it.

Corey plunged after her and the world seemed to drop away. He was going down, straight down, keeping his balance in the saddle only because he was born to the saddle, and trusting his mount without trying to ride him—betting on the instinct of self-preservation that is in horses

as strongly as in men . . . slipping, sliding. . .

Hoofs thundered on the trail below while they were still plunging down the devil's slide. The girl was pulling in her mount, lifting him—and he was finding some surface upon which to brake. Corey was pulling up beside her and the horse, by some miracle, was stopping.

Two riders turned a loop in the trail below. Frenchy LeClerc was riding in the lead, and he looked up, startled.

Corey drew and shot, without conscious thought.

Frenchy LeClerc's horse reared and gave a convulsive leap forward. Frenchy twisted desperately, kicked his feet free of the stirrups and went over the pony's head as his mount went down. His body jerked in the air, hit the barrier boulder and slid down it as the pony's body lunged against the rock.

For an instant, Frenchy was between the horse and the rock, then he rolled limply over the animal's body and lay in the road.

There was a camera-shutter speed to events that gave Corey no chance for reflex. He saw Frenchy go over the horse's head and smash in the same instant in which he saw Jess Gade rein up and go for his gun. Gade was slow for the reason that he had not seen the charging pair on the slope as swiftly as Frenchy had seen them, and, because he had a mount to control that was shying off from the accident that had befallen its trail mate.

In that second that he was off in his timing, Corey shot his horse from under him. Tex cursed as he pulled the trigger.

He was mourning murdered horseflesh even as he swung from the saddle and ran forward. Gade had cleared the saddle better than Frenchy, but his horse did not fare as well. Its shriek was almost human as it skidded off the trail edge and went off into immensity. Gade looked up, his face wet white with his knowledge of

the fate that he had escaped. Corey put his foot over the gun that Gade had dropped and looked down on the man over his own gun.

"Do you know a single reason why I shouldn't pull the trigger?" His voice was harsh. Gade pulled air into his lungs and some of his color came back.

"You won't," he said.

It was the professional gambler's bet on his knowledge of human nature and he had no takers. Nell Rariden moved close to Corey's side, but without Nell Rariden, he still couldn't have shot the man who was at his mercy.

"Avez pitie de moi! Le bon Dieu—"

FRENCHY'S voice was as pitifully shrill as the voice of a child. Corey felt a quiver along his spine. He had counted Frenchy as dead after that brutal fall, and a living Frenchy was either a break or a complication. He kicked Jess Gade's gun back and picked it up.

"Oh! He's hurt terribly!"

Nell Rariden's voice was choked with sympathy. Corey didn't trust Jess Gade. "Turn around, you!" he said. He walked into the man, and with his gun on Gade's spine, he frisked him carefully for weapons. He found none.

"Help me, vite!"

Frenchy was moaning again and Corey walked Jess Gade to him. The brackets deepened around his mouth when he looked down. The little Frenchman was a crushed and bleeding mass. His twisted legs told their own story, and there was a bloody shapelessness to his body. He stretched the fingers of his right hand toward the gun that had been jerked from his grasp. It was a few scant inches from his outstretched fingertips, but there was no further reach in him.

"The gun, *M'sieu* the Stranger. Only the gun if you are merciful. See. I write for you."

He had drawn a notebook from his

pocket and a stub of pencil. He had written on it laboriously and he was clutching the pencil again now that Corey understood his want of the gun.

"I have write, *M'sieu*, the truth. That I did keel Mack Wilson, that I see Jess Gade keel Blue. The agony, *M'sieu*! You owe me nothing. I buy that gun from you. A touch of your foot and it is mine. I sign this for the gun."

He was gasping the words out, pulling vitality out of some deep reservoir within himself. Corey felt his own breath heavy and rattling in his lungs, and even Jess Gade seemed ramrod stiff with horror. But Jess Gade recovered first. He didn't want that confession signed. He took a step toward the gun. Corey stopped him with the muzzle pressure against his spine.

And Corey was torn by impulses that warred with emotions. Frenchy wanted only the privilege of suicide as a relief from agony—and confession was the price that he was willing to pay for a gun.

Frenchy asked the mercy that a man would give a horse. Corey's lips were stiff, but he nodded his head. Frenchy's breath whistled from his lungs in a husky

sigh, and he scrawled his name slowly.

"*Merçi, M'sieu*. And now the gun."

Nell Rariden gasped quietly and crumpled in a heap.

"The gun..."

His fingers stretched and a look of unbelief crossed his face. He blinked once and then his fingers curled. His eyes opened wide and remained fixed as the light snapped out of them. Without the gun he had bought, he died between two ticks of a watch.

Corey's breath whistled between his teeth with relief. He felt Jess Gade relax and then stiffen. Jess Gade wanted that confession, crude and unwitnessed though it was.

They were better wits than Corey's, and Corey knew it. He could not match schemer's weapons with Jess Gade. He could not take Jess Gade back to Bannock under the drop, either, and he had no desire to take him back that way.

He wanted to take Jess Gade back to the ranger—licked.

His eyes were narrowed and the muscle was hardened into ridge-lines along his jaw. He had taken too much from Jess Gade.



The son's axes spoke for the owlhoot—his father's guns sided the law—and somewhere this side of hell, where their trails crossed—one had to end!

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"Walk away from me, Gade, and turn around!"

He prodded the man's spine with the gun and he felt a thrill of exultation when he saw Gade's shoulders twitch. Jess Gade knew now how a man felt when he was given a Mexican reprieve and permitted to escape from jail in the face of men with guns. He knew now, perhaps, how Blue Horgan felt in the moment before he stopped Jess Gade's bullet, how Pancho had felt—and how Tex Corey had felt in the moment before Nell Rariden's brick had shattered the jail lamp.

"Oh . . . oh . . . did he—"

There was a moan from Nell Rariden's lips as she struggled up. Corey did not look around. "No," he said. "He just died."

HE WAS watching Jess Gade. Gade made slow, reluctant work of his short walk and he turned with the fear of death in his eyes. Corey measured him.

"You told me once," he said grimly, "that you could buy all of my kind that you wanted — complete with guns. Frenchy bought a gun. How much would you pay for one?"

Nell Rariden gasped. "Don't!"

Jess Gade had slumped into a crouch. There was a wary hope in his eyes, a hope that dares not be too strong. He was doubtful, unbelieving.

"Don't play with me," he whispered hoarsely. "If you're going to shoot, shoot!"

"A thousand dollars for a gun, Gade." Corey's lips were hard, his facial muscles rigid. "That's what my friends lost in your town."

Gade stared. "You mean that?" he gasped.

"Just that. Have you got the money there?"

"Hell, yes!" Jess Gade's fingers fumbled with eagerness as he jerked the wallet

from his pocket and thumbled hastily through a wad of bills.

"Count out a thousand and throw it on the ground!"

Gade flashed him another unbelieving look, counted the bills and tossed them to Nell Rariden. Tex Corey took a side step and kicked Frenchy's gun over the side of the trail. He listened to it hitting the rock wall on the way down. His eyes were fixed expressionlessly on Jess Gade.

"That leaves two guns," he said. "How much for the other one, Gade?"

The hope left Gade's face. His lips twisted in a snarl. "Have your fun!"

"I mean it. Count out another thousand and I'll give you both of them. That second thousand is mine—damages and fighting wages."

Gade's hands opened and closed. He didn't believe it quite, but he was a gambler and he knew men. Corey wasn't a liar or a welcher and he knew, looking at him, that he was not. His hands trembled a little, but he counted out the bills and threw them after the first stack. Corey sighed. He passed Gade's own gun to Nell Rariden.

"Take the bullets out of that, Nell," he said.

"What?" Gade's eyes widened. The girl gasped, but she took the gun with a steady hand. When she had removed the shells from the cylinder, Corey passed her the second gun.

"Now that one!"

Gade seemed frozen and Corey had the guns back in his hands, empty, before Gade shook off his surprise. Corey stepped forward gravely and handed them over.

"You bought guns," he said. "There was no sale of ammunition."

Gade took the guns, snarled an oath and lashed out. It was the move that Tex Corey had been waiting for. He stepped inside that first savage blow and his left snapped to Gade's chin. The boss of

Bannock took a backward step, and Corey landed his right after his left. Jess Gade went down and he came up without the guns.

Corey met him with a ramrod left, and they smashed back and forth across the rocky trail, with the sheer drop to one side of them, dead horses and a dead man at their feet, and a bewildered girl moving away from them with cold fright in her eyes.

Corey's blood coursed hotly, and he didn't feel the punches that ripped to his already battered body. He felt neither exhaustion nor pain nor anything else save the fierce desire to annihilate the man before him.

Gade felt himself being driven back. There was a salty taste in his mouth and bells ringing in his brain. Jess Gade was panting and his eyes were wide—and he reverted to type. He scooped up a rock with one hand as he charged in and brought it up with a snap motion.

It would have smacked Tex Corey's skull, but Corey had a single tick of time when he saw that scooping motion start. He bunched his muscles, and as the rock whizzed past his head, he put his weight

behind a swinging, overhand right that caught Jess Gade coming in.

The boss of Bannock was lifted clean off his feet and he was out before he hit the ground.

Tex felt Nell Rariden's arms about him before he saw her and he blinked down at her. "I'm sorry. I had to do it that way," he said.

He put his arm around her, an arm strangely heavy now, and it was good to feel her close to him. Somehow they'd get back to Bannock and there was no more fight in Jess Gade. When he recovered, he'd be through. He was of a breed that can be licked only once.

"Unless you like the eating house business," Tex said huskily, "I own a hardware store in Kansas City."

"I'd like the hardware store better."

She was laughing happily, a little hysterically against him, and the world seemed fresh and new and unbelievable. There was a hardware store in Kansas City, but he had an idea that it would still be there after he left. He'd fought with this girl and he'd risked danger with her.

She was not the kind to make a man wear an apron behind a counter.



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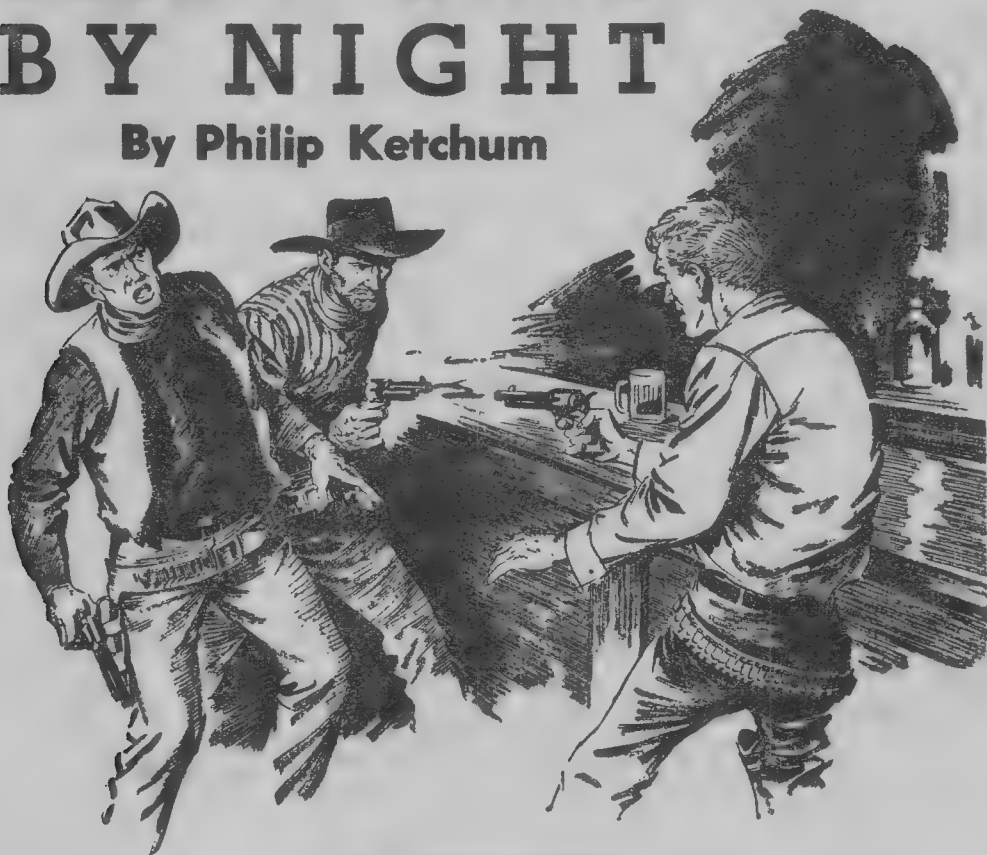
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"All the bullets that never stopped your old man—son, we've saved 'em up for you. You're welcome home—to hell!"

THEY RIDE BY NIGHT

By Philip Ketchum



Two shots rang out together. . . .

FOR a week after Charles Kerry's arrival, old John McDonald held his peace, making no comment with regard to the young man who had come out from Kansas City to work in his bank. Then one night, when he was sitting in the Red Dog Saloon talking with Sheriff Sam Gavin, he muttered, "I couldn't have known it, Sam. I'll bet he surprised you as much as me."

Sam Gavin scowled at his mug of beer. "Who are you talkin' about?"

"Young Charles Kerry. Fred's boy."

A thin smile touched Gavin's lips. "He's not much like his father, is he?"

McDonald breathed an oath and a far-away look came into his eyes. "Remember the day Fred rode up into the hills after Black Webber? He had a bullet in his shoulder an' another in his thigh, but that didn't stop him. Black Webber an' the two outlaws with him didn't either."

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"He was hit in a dozen places after that fight," Gavin commented. "I'll bet he's still packin' some of that lead."

McDonald sighed. "If that woman hadn't dragged him back to Kansas City, his whelp wouldn't have turned out like—like he did. I can't understand it, Sam. At first I thought that I must be wrong about him, because in spite of his city clothes he's like his old man was twenty years ago, when the three of us first came out here. But, shucks . . . this afternoon Mike Allen got all liquored up an' came into the bank wavin' a gun, an' the kid turned as pale as a sheet."

"What are you gonna do with him, John?" the sheriff asked.

"What can I do? He's Fred's boy, an' Fred an' me—" McDonald swore again and finished his beer.

It was just then that Bill Schemmerhorn came into the saloon, flanked by Tex Jewett and Luke Baker, two of his riders. Schemmerhorn saw the two men sitting at the table in the corner and came over that way after waving his men to the bar.

"What about that loan?" he asked McDonald.

McDonald nodded. "The papers are all fixed up, Bill. I'm goin' back to the bank for a while. Drop in perty soon an' sign 'em."

Schemmerhorn said that he would and turned away, and Sam Gavin, following the young man with his eyes, said to the cattleman banker, "Another extension of his note?"

McDonald grunted.

"Why?" Gavin asked.

For a moment McDonald didn't answer, then he said, evasively, "He's been havin' a tough time, Sam. His spread is close to the border, an' the rustlers—"

Gavin flushed. "There's some things worse than rustlers."

"You mean the men he's been hirin' lately?"

"Yeah, men like Jewett an' Baker. They're not cowhands, John—they're killers."

"He hasn't lost any stock since he's hired 'em," McDonald pointed out.

The sheriff shrugged and changed the subject, and for a while longer the two men talked. Then McDonald left to go over to the bank, stopping to speak to Schemmerhorn for a moment on the way out.

CHARLES KERRY was tired. He had been adding columns of figures, checking and rechecking totals until the pages of the bank's ledger blurred before his eyes. But the five dollars and eighty cents which he was trying to find was still lost. Finally he got to his feet, crossed over to the window and stared out at Sergeant's main street.

The night was dark and there were but few lights showing. Across from the bank was the Red Dog Saloon, several doors down was the Crystal Palace and beyond that the Roundup. In front of each place, a row of horses was tied to the hitching rail, and occasionally the figure of a man would appear for a while in the street, moving from one saloon to another.

The shadows of night, Kerry had discovered, lent a certain glamour to Sergeant's appearance. They shut out the squalor of the town, made it seem more like the place his father had used to tell him about—a place of sudden excitement and of tingling adventure.

A brief smile twisted Kerry's lips, and a sense of loneliness swept over him. There were times, when he was alone, that he felt a close attachment to this great Western country. But more often, and for a reason which he couldn't understand, he felt like a total stranger and resented his promise to his mother to come out here and take a place in McDonald's bank.

He would much rather, he knew, have taken almost any other job. He could ride.

His father had taught him that. And he could shoot. His father had taught him that also. But his mother had always looked on the West with fear and horror, and she hadn't wanted him to come at all. Only on his promise to come to the bank, and on his father's pledge that the place was 'civilized', had she agreed to his trip.

Shrugging his shoulders, he turned away from the window and returned to his book, a tall young man, hardly twenty, fair of hair and skin, blue-eyed and restless. He was still working over his books when John McDonald came in a little later.

McDonald frowned at the sight of him. "What's the matter, Charles?"

"Can't strike a balance," he answered.

"Why not let it go an' get after it the first thing in the mornin', when you're fresh?"

Kerry hesitated.

"I'll just check it over once more," he said finally.

McDonald grunted, went into the room which served as his office, and then came back a moment later and said, "I'll help you, Charles, an' then we'll knock off. I don't like you workin' down here nights."

Together they checked the figures once more, but the five dollars and eighty cents eluded them.

"We'll both get after it in the mornin'," McDonald promised. "Get your hat an' let's go."

KERRY turned to the back hall to get his hat. When he returned, McDonald had the vault open and was carrying the ledgers inside. Moving that way, Kerry was just about to speak when he heard the squeak of the front door and, whirling, faced two masked men—each with a gun in his hand. There could be no question as to the purpose of their visit.

Kerry gasped. Instinctively he raised his arms, backed to the wall, and out of

the corner of his eye saw old John McDonald standing in the entrance to the vault with his own arms stretched up in the air.

The two men came forward swiftly, one of them advancing on him, the other moving toward the vault. Kerry heard McDonald smother an oath and then heard him yell, "Why, I know you—you—"

What happened after that would always seem to Charles Kerry like the bewildering climax of a terrible nightmare. He saw McDonald's arm jerk down and under his coat toward his gun; he saw the man facing the banker coolly shoot him through the head; he saw McDonald stagger back and saw his murderer following him into the vault. Kerry plunged forward, unthinking, knowing only that a man had been killed. He wasn't armed. His hands balled into fists. He stabbed out at the man in front of him, but whether he hit that man or missed him, he never knew, for a stunning blow from the man's gun caught him behind the ear and pain exploded in his head, numbing his senses and paralyzing his muscles.

As he slid to the floor he was aware of running feet, of a slamming door, and then of the sound of horses galloping away from the back of the building. He tried to sit up, tried to bring his eyes back into focus, tried to order the confusion in his mind, and he was just getting to his knees when Bill Schemmerhorn came tearing in.

Schemmerhorn pulled him up. "Who were they? Which way did they go?" he shouted.

Kerry tried to speak. "I—I—"

"Which way did they go?" Schemmerhorn yelled again.

Kerry pointed toward the back door. Releasing him, Schemmerhorn ran that way. Shots from the back of the bank shattered the stillness of the night, but by that time Sheriff Sam Gavin and a bunch of men from the Red Dog were piling in at the front door.

In broken sentences, Charles Kerry told the story of what had happened. He heard Schemmerhorn returning to report that he thought he had hit one of the bandits, and then a posse was hastily organized and rode off. More men gathered at the bank. A doctor, after looking sadly at old John McDonald's body, shook his head and turned to examine Kerry. But Kerry didn't need his help. There was a slight bruise behind his ear. That was all.

After McDonald's body had been taken away, Kerry locked the vault, and later he locked the bank and went to his room in the hotel, but for a long time he didn't go to bed. Standing at the window, he stared out into the darkness of the night, and wished that he could have gone with the posse. Violent anger stirred deep within him, and his fists clenched until the muscles of his arms knotted hard as rocks. Over and over he lived that tense moment in the bank—the moment that had brought death to John McDonald.

Still later his mind turned to McDonald's daughter Norma. He had seen her several times, had felt closely drawn to her. But she had treated him quite coolly. She too, he knew, would be awake this night, and he wished that he could comfort her. But he understood that there was nothing he could do to make things any easier for her.

He finally went to bed, wondering just before he dropped into troubled sleep what his father would have done if he had been here.

The posse returned at noon the next day, tired, dusty and discouraged. They had found no trace of the outlaws in the surrounding country.

Kerry watched them ride into town, saw them dismount in front of the Red Dog Saloon and go inside. Locking the bank, he crossed the street and joined them at the bar. There Sam Gavin asked him again what had happened, and he retold his story. There was nothing he

could add to what he had already said. There had been nothing distinctive about the two masked men. They had been clothed in conventional cow-country clothes—boots, levis, blue shirts and old Stetsons. But Kerry had checked the bank's loss now and could report on that.

"The payroll for the Carson Mine is missing," he said to the sheriff. "It was all made up and was to be called for this afternoon. It was in a canvas sack just inside the vault. The man who shot McDonald must have grabbed it just before they left. It had over five thousand dollars in it."

"Okay."

Gavin nodded and turned back to the bar. He finished his beer and went out, though most of the others remained. Schemmerhorn was standing close to Kerry, and when Kerry ordered a glass of beer, Schemmerhorn said sneeringly, "Hadn't you better make it milk?"

Kerry flushed. He was aware that a deep silence had fallen over the room and that all of the members of the posse had turned to stare at him. Their clothes were dusty and their faces were streaked with sweat. Shadows circled their eyes. All night and most of the morning they had ridden the plains in search of the men who had robbed the bank and killed John McDonald. Looking at them now, Charles Kerry knew that he seemed clean and cool and rested, and he could see in their eyes a scorn which he tried to understand.

Schemmerhorn turned to the bartender. "Make it milk."

The bartender grinned. He set a glass of milk in front of Charles Kerry. Kerry blinked at it. An impulse came to him to seize the glass and dash it into Schemmerhorn's face, but he didn't. Though he tried to understand the other man's antagonism, he couldn't.

"A little bump on the head," a man standing close to Schemmerhorn murmured.

"Maybe," Schemmerhorn answered. "Remember, we didn't find any trace of the outlaws."

As the meaning of that statement came home to him, Kerry's body started to tremble, and Schemmerhorn, noticing it, laughed, and then before Kerry could move said suddenly, "Let's go someplace else. Someplace where the air's cleaner."

THEY all trooped out while Charles Kerry stared after them. His face felt hot and anger boiled in him. He wanted to shout after them, but the shock of what they had inferred had stunned him. He stood there, blinking at the swinging doors through which they had gone, until the bartender's voice, bitter and sarcastic, drawled, "Well, do you want the milk or don't you?"

Kerry nodded, drained the glass, and walked out to the street.

He saw only one person between that time and nightfall, and that was Sam Gavin, who came again to ask him about the robbery. Sam said bluntly, "There's a rumor that there wasn't any two men who came in here last night." His eyes were frosty gimlets. For a moment Kerry didn't answer. He knew that to give way to a blind rage would only make things worse. "What do you think?" he asked finally.

Gavin shrugged. "I don't know. We didn't find any trace of the men you said were here."

Kerry leaned forward. "Schemmerhorn started this. Why, Gavin?"

The sheriff frowned. "No reason I can think of. He was comin' over to the bank

last night to see McDonald. John was extendin' his note. He's not mixed up in this, Kerry. I might have suspected the two men he had with him in town last night, but they rode in the posse with us."

Kerry straightened. He said slowly, "My father always looked on John McDonald as the best friend he ever had."

"You're not much like your father, are you, Kerry?" the sheriff sighed.

Kerry's lips tightened. "I don't know."

Shortly after that the sheriff left, and after it was dark Kerry had dinner in a restaurant, where he was very much aware of the dark looks of the others around him.

Some time later he went out to John McDonald's home.

Norma McDonald answered his knock, and when she saw who it was her face paled. She asked sharply, "What do you want here?"

In spite of the anguish in her eyes, she had never seemed more beautiful. She wasn't quite so tall as he, but she stood very straight, with both fists clenched at her sides.

Words stumbled from Kerry's lips—words totally inadequate to express what was in his heart. To his own ears they sounded flat and trite. "I thought—that is, if there's anything I can do—"

"Haven't you already done enough?"

Her words ripped out like a slap in the face. Kerry sucked his breath in. "I—I don't know what you mean."

Bitterly, the girl answered him. "Oh, I don't believe what the rest of the people here in Sergeant are saying. You didn't kill my father. You wouldn't have had

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the nerve. But the least you could have done was to have fought at his side when he went for his gun. Only a rank coward would have acted the way you did."

Kerry didn't answer. His hands twitched helplessly at his sides. He wanted to tell her that he had tried to fight, but the words wouldn't come.

Still he stood there, just looking at her. "Please go away!" the girl said.

He couldn't turn away. Stiffly he said, "I want you to know what I thought of your father. I—"

A man's figure joined the girl at the door, and a voice said, "Let me handle this, Norma." Then he pushed past the girl and stepped out on the porch. The man was Bill Schemmerhorn.

Kerry's eyes narrowed, and for an instant he thought that the girl might be back of Schemmerhorn's antagonism. But at the same time he knew that that wasn't the answer. Even if Schemmerhorn was interested in the girl, Kerry was too new here in the town to be considered a rival. Besides, the few times Norma had seen him, she had treated him almost as if he didn't exist.

"Well," Schemmerhorn said coldly, "you heard her. Get out."

Kerry's mind turned back to the night of the robbery, and then to something the sheriff had said to him. The two things didn't fit together, but the idea which had jumped into his head gripped his imagination. He said, "Just a minute, Schemmerhorn," and he was surprised at the steadiness of his tone. "Just a minute. How did you happen to show up at the bank so soon after Mr. McDonald was killed?"

Schemmerhorn's face clouded. If he had struck at him, Kerry would have known that the notion that Schemmerhorn was connected with the robbery was false. But Schemmerhorn didn't strike at him. Instead he said slowly, "Why I came there to see McDonald about my note.

I was just starting across the street from the Red Dog when I heard the shot."

The girl looked from one to the other, uncomprehending.

Kerry frowned, and when he didn't speak, Schemmerhorn said, "The sheriff knows that. He heard McDonald ask me to come over."

Kerry shook his head. "No, Schemmerhorn. McDonald wasn't expecting you last night. He and I were leaving when the bandits entered the bank. He didn't expect you at all. Do you know what I think?"

Schemmerhorn sucked in his breath. "I don't care what you think," he grated. Then his fist lashed out, and though Kerry tried to jerk his head away from the blow, he wasn't in time. It caught him on the side of the face, tilting him backward. He fell against the porch railing, and over it to the ground.

He was dimly aware of Norma's voice calling, "No, Bill! No!" But when he got to his feet, Schemmerhorn had come off the porch and was facing him, with a sneer twisting his lips.

Old John McDonald had been right about the way Charles Kerry was built. His body was like his father's, lithe and wiry, but with a surprising solidity. And as he came to his feet, he didn't wait for any comment from Schemmerhorn. His right arm swung up, and a rocklike fist smashed against Schemmerhorn's face. His left shot out and buried itself to the wrist in his opponent's bulging stomach. Schemmerhorn staggered back, and Kerry waded in. He wasn't a banker now. He wasn't on alien soil. Kids fight in Kansas City as well just as they do any place else. A fist to the nose in a gang fight there would bring a torrent of blood. Kerry flattened Schemmerhorn's nose and found that he too could bleed. But the fight wasn't all a question of striking out at the man before him. He had to take blows too. Schemmerhorn recovered from

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the flurry of his attack, and with a profane shout charged forward. Fists thudded against Kerry's head, beat him once to his knees. A hand clawing at him ripped his shirt from the throat to the waist. One eye was half closed, and blood from a cut in his lip tasted warm and salty in his mouth.

BACK and forth across the lawn in front of the house the two men battled, while from the porch Norma McDonald watched them with fear-widened eyes. Neither man answered her calls. Sent to the ground by a stinging right, Charles Kerry scrambled to his feet. He ducked another right and smashed out at Schemmerhorn's face. He hit him again and then again. Schemmerhorn backed up. He tripped and fell, and when he got up, Kerry hit him again.

They were away from the house, and Charles Kerry suddenly felt a wave of confidence sweep over him. New strength seemed to flow through his veins. His head, foggy for a while, had cleared, and as he smashed a blow at the man before him he thought of how dark it had been the night before—and then of Schemmerhorn's statement that he had seen the bandits riding away from the bank. He couldn't have. By the time Schemmerhorn had reached the back of the bank, even the sound of their horses had died out. That statement of Schemmerhorn's had been a lie. But why?

He crossed a right to Schemmerhorn's jaw with all the strength that was in him.

Schemmerhorn staggered and went to the ground again, and while Kerry stood above him, the pattern of what might have happened flashed through his mind. Leaning over the fallen man he said through swollen lips, "Shall I tell you what happened, Schemmerhorn? Well, listen. Those two men of yours were the outlaws

(Continued on page 124)

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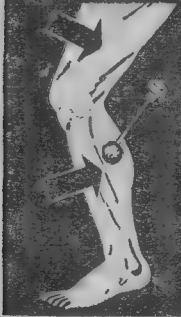
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(Continued from page 122)

who held up the bank and killed McDonald. You were out in the street in front, watching. They would never have both come in there without a man outside keeping watch for them. After they fogged it with the money, they rode around the town, came back and joined the posse which was just getting ready to leave."

Schemmerhorn was sitting up. He spat out an oath and panted, "That's a lie—a damned lie!"

But Charles Kerry laughed. He knew that he had guessed what had happened. It was natural that Schemmerhorn should have bragged that he saw two men fleeing away from the bank, for he wanted people to think that. It was natural, too, that he should point the finger of suspicion at Kerry, for Kerry had seen the holdup.

Schemmerhorn had made no attempt to get up, but he was still snarling curses, denying what Kerry had charged. Kerry, breathing heavily, considered what he could do. He had no proof, only suspicion. There seemed but one course to follow now, and straightening, he said, slowly, "Schemmerhorn, my father once lived around here. Maybe you've heard of him, maybe you haven't. I don't know or care. Back home, people think I'm like him, even if they don't around Sergeant. But at least I'm like him in one respect. He taught me that a man should fight his own battles, and from now on this affair is mine, personally. One of those two men of yours—Jewett and Baker I think their names are—killed John McDonald, but you and the other are equally guilty with him. I'm leaving here, going after a gun, and when I find you again—you or either of those two men—I'm going to start shooting. Is that clear?"

Schemmerhorn got to his feet. He looked at Kerry and laughed. Then he suddenly turned around and walked off.

Kerry watched him go, but when he

THEY RIDE BY NIGHT

would have followed, the figure of Norma McDonald hurried forward and caught him at the gate. Grasping him by the arm, the girl said, "I heard what you told him."

Kerry looked at her. "Well?"

Her fingers tightened on his arms.

"Where are you going?"

"After a gun."

But Norma shook her head. "No! You mustn't."

"It's the only thing for me to do. I've got to get a gun."

"Listen!" Norma insisted, still blocking his way with her body. "Those two men you mentioned are both gunfighters. You can't go after them. You wouldn't have a chance. You must go and see Sam Gavin—tell him what you know."

Something in the girl's voice made Kerry stare at her intently. "You—you think I'm right?"

She nodded. Her face seemed very pale. Her lips were trembling. "I know you're right about part of it. Father told me at noon that he would be home early."

"Then after he made that appointment which the sheriff heard, he must have seen Schemmerhorn and cancelled it," Kerry said.

"That's right!"

"But Schemmerhorn never admitted that," Kerry went on excitedly. "He had to have some excuse for arriving at the bank so soon after the shot. That's it, and I recall that your father went to his room just after arriving at the bank. That must have been when he sent you the message. Could I—do you have his gun?"

"Why?"

"I'd like to see it."

Norma led the way to the house, got her father's gun and showed it to Kerry. Kerry hefted the gun in his hand. A thin smile touched his lips. "It's just like my father's, same weight and make."

Looking past the girl, Kerry noticed a



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belt and holster hanging on a nail at the side of a fireplace. He walked that way, took down the belt and fastened it around his waist. The gun he dropped into the holster. Then, while Norma stared at him, wide-eyed, he adjusted the belt so that the holster sagged low on the inside of his right leg, tied there by leather thongs.

He straightened at last, unaware of how ludicrous he appeared. Dried blood stained his face: His lip was swollen and one eye was almost closed. His hair was mussed and there was an angry bruise on his forehead. His shirt was almost torn from his body.

"You're going after them?" Norma breathed.

Charles Kerry nodded.

"I am."

She put out a trembling hand.

"You don't know what you're doing!"

There was a sharp, hard look in the blue of Kerry's eyes, a look which Norma had never seen there before. "Perhaps not," he answered slowly, "but I've started this now, and I'll see it through."

CHARLES Kerry had never felt more calm in his life than at the moment when he pushed open the swinging doors of the Red Dog Saloon and, stepping through them, saw Bill Schemmerhorn, Luke Baker and Tex Jewett leaning against the bar watching for him.

Later, some of the men who were there when he came in tried to tell how his appearance had shocked them. To at least one man it must have seemed funny, for he laughed aloud, then fell silent as he saw Kerry move to the bar.

At that same moment Norma McDONALD succeeded in locating Sam Gavin at the Crystal Palace, and was telling him what had happened while she tried to hurry him through the door.

"They'll kill him," she gasped. "He

THEY RIDE BY NIGHT

doesn't know what he's going up against. He doesn't even know how to wear a gun! He tied the holster on the inside of his leg!"

"What's that?" Sam gasped.

"On the inside of his leg. It—"

The sheriff cut in sharply, "The right leg?"

"Yes, but hurry, hurry—"

Inside the Red Dog Saloon, Charles Kerry had stopped at the edge of the bar, facing Schemmerhorn and the two men who were with him. There wasn't a man in there who hadn't guessed by this time, either from the look in Kerry's face or the attitude of the other three that trouble was in the air.

But Sam Gavin wasn't there, and a man's quarrel was a man's quarrel, and so those in the room backed away and watched and listened. Turning to the bartender, Kerry spoke.

"A glass of milk, please."

The startled bartender complied and then drew away. Kerry reached out with his left hand for the glass of milk. Staring at the three men facing him, he knew that he had guessed things correctly. They had waited here for him.

Raising the glass of milk, Kerry said slowly, "I wanted to do this this morning."

He flipped his wrist and the milk shot out and splattered in Schemmerhorn's face.

Schemmerhorn stepped back, a curse rumbling in his throat. But the other two men didn't step back. Some of the milk had splashed over on Jewett and Baker, and almost simultaneously those two went for their guns.

Kerry's shoulders hunched forward. There wasn't a man there in that room who saw him draw. They had expected to see him die, and then two shots rang out, so close together that the noise of their explosions blended. Those who were watching blinked in surprise. For it wasn't

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ALL-STORY WESTERN

Charles Kerry who staggered back but Luke Baker and Tex Jewett.

Then, while those in the room were still stupefied with surprise, there came a third shot. They saw Schemmerhorn's gun twisted from his grasp as a bullet from Kerry's gun smashed his wrist.

It was just after that third shot that Sam Gavin burst into the room, followed by Norma McDonald. His eyes must have taken in what had happened very quickly, for a grin spread over his face. Walking up to Charles Kerry he said, "You're your father's son after all! He taught you that inside draw, didn't he?"

Kerry nodded. His face was a little pale and he was afraid that in another moment he would be trembling.

Sam was still speaking. "Fastest man with a gun this country ever saw, that father of yours. Looked awkward as hell the way he wore his gun. But, man, how he could throw lead!"

There were others who were crowding around now, and someone was bending over Baker. Schemmerhorn started to edge toward the door. Sam suddenly noticed it and yelled at him, but Schemmerhorn turned and fled. That cinched the case, Kerry thought, but the man who was bending over Baker called to the sheriff and the sheriff bent over him and then after a while arose.

To Kerry, he said, "They took the money as you guessed an' as you told Norma. It's dropped in a hole back of the bank. Schemmerhorn made sure it was covered an' raked fresh dirt over the spot when he went out to shoot after the bandits. They planned on diggin' it up later. I've got to get out after Schemmerhorn. See that Norma gets home, will you? An'—we're glad to have a Kerry back in Sergeant again, son. Hope you'll stay a long time."

Charles Kerry moved over to the door, where Norma was waiting.

A BULLET IS MY HERITAGE

(Continued from page 73)

and his shoulders carried their old, reckless set. "Kid," he said, "I know how much you thought of your horse, and I'm not holdin' this against you. You'll feel different in a couple of days."

Galt made no contradiction. He owed it to Herb, he guessed, to let him save his face that much. But it wasn't the colt alone, and he'd never feel differently. Dan Galt knew it, and he knew that Herb knew it too as he rode so jauntily away.

At no time had Dan felt anger, and later in the morning he spoke of it to Mary Thorsen. "I guess, the only thing that made me really mad," he confessed ruefully, "was when that little bald-headed Hinks ruined my tub."

She put her hand on his arm. "I know, Dan," she said. "I know how it must be with you." Her voice sounded carefully controlled.

They stood on Thorsen's porch, Dan Galt and Mary Thorsen, and suddenly emotion shook the restraint of this grave girl, and she exclaimed, "Oh, Dan, when I think of how you raised the colt, and now to lose him like this!"

Galt stared down at his scuffed boots. "You can't blame Herb for that," he muttered. "That could happen to anyone. And there's more horses to be raised and just as good ones, I guess." He fumbled an instant with his words. "But there's one thing," he went on slowly, "that I can't replace, and I've been afraid that was lost, too. I mean you, Mary. Maybe I never had you to lose."

She didn't answer for a long while—as if there were no words in her to tell him. Her blue eyes followed the flight of a chicken hawk against the bright blue of the sky. So blue it stung tears into her bluer eyes.

His jaw was tight with suspense, and she put out her hand to him. "You've had me, Dan, all along," she answered quiet-

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ALL-STORY WESTERN

ly. "I've known it ever since Herb came back, even if I didn't know it before. I'd have told you if you'd troubled to ask, but you didn't. You stayed away, and I never saw you. A girl has some pride." Then a stain flooded her cheeks, and she turned quickly, for her father, a great, blond giant of a man, had come up on the porch.

"That Herb feller!" Jed Thorsen cried in vast indignation. "This morning I am talking to Tom Rathdrum and—"

"And he said that Herb was rustling from the Boxed M," Mary interrupted. "Papa, hasn't Tom been saying that ever since Herb came back from prison?"

"The Boxed M," murmured Galt, "always has had it in for the Catlins. They never proved—"

He broke off helplessly.

"A man steals your cows, and still you stick up for him!" Jed Thorsen laughed harshly. "Tom Rathdrum told me you're a little dumb, Danny, and that I am beginning to believe. You and my Mary both. You hear me?"

Dan nodded. It would be this way always, he guessed. Worthless he and Mary might know Herb to be, but always they would defend him before others. "I hear you," he told Jed, "and I guess I'll be hearing you some more, because I'm going to stay for dinner."

Jed Thorsen's blue eyes twinkled. "I thought that," he said placidly. "It's like I tell my Mary. It's not a big Swede girl like you, I say, that Danny Galt come to see. He comes to eat."

Galt grinned and began rolling a cigarette. This, he thought, with a deep sense of satisfaction, was as it had been before Herb came back from prison. There was the spring still to be piped to the cabin, and the cabin itself to be finished, but the sun was bright and clear overhead, and at this moment he could see no shadows whatsoever.

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